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# Ideological Interpretation and the Aesthetic Nature of Literature

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**Ideological Interpretation and the Aesthetic Nature of Literature**

By

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A Thesis

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### **Abstract**

Recent literary theory has assumed that literary works are reflections of the dominant ideological thought present within culture. This thesis addresses the question of what role the aesthetic nature of a literary work plays in determining its own ideological meaning. Terry Eagleton claims that literature and literary theory have reinforced the dominant political modes of thought, as the aesthetic properties have merely masked this ideological function, and must be disregarded in order to reveal the true ideological nature contained within a work. Deriving his framework from Jaques Lacan, Slavoj Zizek argues that ideology is pervasive through all levels of culture, inseparable from fundamental understanding. He further reveals a divide between the Symbolic order which contains conceptualized understanding in language, and the Real which escapes such definition. Umberto Eco argues that interpretation must remain coherent with the totality of the work in order to avoid overinterpretation, which uses the work as an example of something external to itself. Alan Sinfield argues that literature reveals “faultlines” within a culture, and allows dissident views to engage with dominant ideologies. Mikhail Bakhtin’s view of dialogism suggests that any literary expression will contain multiple views or ideologies, including internally persuasive ones which can be contained within aesthetic expression, and external authoritative ones which remain detached from artistic nature.

This thesis argues that defining a work of literature as a particular example of an ideological position disregards the aesthetic qualities it possesses and reduces it to an indistinguishable cultural artifact which is used as an example of culture without recognizing the unique experience that it provides as a narrative. Such attempts diminish the continuing possibilities of meaning that a work can generate through its ambiguous nature. Rather, the aesthetic qualities of literature allow it to provide multiple meanings which surpass reduction to a specific ideological position, even as it necessarily possesses ideological content. Final ideological conclusions are deferred, and interpretative freedom is provided for the reader to reach individual conclusions in the aesthetic space beyond Symbolic conceptualized thought which allows a remainder of meaning to escape ideology as a hint of the Real.

## **Table of Contents**

Chapter 1: Ideology and Literary Theory .....	4
Chapter 2: Interpretation, Overinterpretation and Use .....	40
Chapter 3: The Ideological Possibilities of Literary Language .....	56
Chapter 4: Aesthetics and the Real .....	73
Works Cited .....	84

## **Chapter 1: Ideology and Literary Theory**

Trends in literary theory over the last several decades have revealed the significant links between literary works and the culture that produces them. The ideological viewpoints of society, particularly, have become significantly transmitted through literature. Political criticisms, primarily those related to Marxist theory, such as the analysis presented by Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Zizek, have revealed the extensive magnitude of ideological influence on cultural products and suggest that there is never a neutral point of view from which ideology can be objectively and comparatively evaluated. The field of theory has taken a wide approach to examining the content of literature, noting the contextual relations that surround and inform it. This process has, however, potentially displaced the importance of the work as an artistic product, leaving it to be just a cultural and political document. Although some political critics suggest that the dominant ideology is always transmitted and reinforced, a recognition of what differentiates literature from other kinds of discourse reveals a gap from which alternate and multiple ideological views can emerge.

Although literature necessarily contains ideological thought, a final interpretation cannot be completely fixed to a single political view. As an artwork, the literary work continually invites reinterpretation of its multiple possibilities of meaning. Literature provides an excellent example of the intellectual trends of a particular place and time, but that does not necessitate that literature must sustain the thinking of the era. As a form of art, it has the ability to bring something new into a society and to create new patterns of thought. Using literature as a document of historical importance is illuminating, but that method must be realized as one of use, rather than interpretation primarily concerned with the work as literature. This is significant

because theory, while originating new fields of knowledge and interesting discussion, has the potential in its wide range of interest to omit or diminish the status of literature as a primarily aesthetic artifact. As a deliberate construction, created through a complex authorial process, literature transcends simple social and historical discourse and should be recognized as such. Through multiple levels of meaning literature contains an internal tension between its aesthetic properties and its ideological content, and can introduce possibilities that undermines the current ideology. Literary interpretation, as an investigation of the work itself, should recognize these possibilities of meaning beyond a fixed determination of the immediate ideological content.

The development of literary theory has revealed the significant presence and pervasive nature of ideology which permeates all levels of culture and any resulting artifacts of that culture, such as literature. This presents a problematic situation in which cultural works reinforce existing dominant thought and nothing “new” can ever be introduced. Literary theory has explicitly analyzed this condition and has treated the aesthetic features of literature as a mechanism for masking and reinforcing ideology. Eagleton has argued that there is no purely detached, objective, or neutral stance from which a critique of ideology can originate (“Ideology” xiv). It can only be viewed subjectively. Literature is useful because it provides a particular perspective from which to view history, and the development of literary theory is entangled with the political dynamics of culture. Because it is concrete and an exploration of value, feeling, and experience, literature will engage with the questions and problems of a cultural nature. Ultimately, in his view, literature sustains and reinforces the dominant political system. Theory does as well, unless it is unmasking the political projections of power underneath the aesthetic surface of literature, and the exposure of these mechanisms should be the point of such theory. In the tradition of Karl Marx, and extending through the work of theorists such as

Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, this view suggests that the content of a literary work, being inseparable from ideology, is historically determined, and is always a result of its cultural context.

This position, as maintained by Eagleton, prompts consideration of whether aesthetics is a servant of ideology, or whether it can produce something beyond ideological thought. An examination of the relationship between aesthetics and ideology will take into consideration Zizek's understanding of ideology, and his Lacanian framework, in suggesting the possibilities of aesthetic form as an escape from the totalizing nature of ideology. In response to recent theory, George Levine and Peter Brooks question literary theory's lack of attention to aesthetic form. Additionally, Lou F. Caton argues that it is aesthetic form combined with the ideological particulars that create literary meaning. As an example, *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare presents a work that is received as primarily political. Meredith Skura and Barbara Fuchs have resisted this idea, pointing out alternate elements of the play while arguing that the "Shakespearian" aspects, or the multiplicities of meaning provided by aesthetic construction, provide an example of literature transcending ideological particulars.

In evaluating the ideological conclusions of a work, the process of interpretation is called into question. Umberto Eco argues that not all interpretations are plausible and that literary works can indeed be over-interpreted. Good interpretations, in his view, cannot be systematically determined, but there are bad interpretations which clearly violate the work. While the possible ranges of interpretation can never be fully determined by the author and there may be "harmonics" which multiply and create additional meanings which perhaps were not intended by the author but are produced by the language, there can be a limit set where ultimately some interpretations will fall outside the range of possible intentions. Proposing a

path between the extremes of allowing the work to mean anything and being forced to conclude one correct interpretation, Eco considers the "rights" of the work in contrast to the potentially unlimited rights of the readers. Additionally, he questions whether interpretation is discovery of hidden meaning or the creation of meaning which originates from the reader. Eco's assertion that the work has priority is useful in investigating the ideological content. Presuming that a work primarily sustains the dominant ideology gives too much weight to the cultural factors involved. Rather, a closer look at a literary work may reveal the faults inherent in its society and provide a counter-example to that dominant view. Assuming that historical thought, as it has come to be understood, must be present in the reading can produce over-interpretation and overshadow the dissenting threads of thought present within the work. Jonathan Culler's response that any use provoked by a literary work is a good thing, and anything that limits use is underinterpretation, provides an understanding of what theory does and how it can be improved by reintegrating attention to aesthetic qualities.

Alan Sinfield has provided a discussion of how dissident views might be injected into society through literature, thereby bypassing the "entrapment model" that views literature as a passive transmitter of ideology. Mikhail Bakhtin has introduced the idea of "dialogism," in which multiple types of language, along with varied ideological views, are entangled within a literary narrative. Rather than a "monologic" form which disseminates a single message, dialogic works contain multiple meanings in competition. Meaning, he suggests, is never finally determined, but as always an ongoing process of relation between the author, work, and reader.

Finally, looking at *1984* as an example of a particular ideological conclusion reveals a deeper exploration of ideology. Steven Blakemore explores the connections between language and ideology within the work which shows an overall awareness of ideological systems.



Recognition of literature as an exploration of ideology itself, and the possible alternatives to any one system, indicates that it can supersede the ideological conditions of its construction. The harmonics produced as an aesthetic effect reveal a glimpse of the Lacanian order of the Real, existing outside the Symbolic framework from which ideology is constructed.

Considering literature through a political critique suggests an ideological problem. Early Marxist criticism regarded ideology as that thought which hides and sustains the fundamental economic relations of the base. Existing at the lowest fundamental levels of the superstructure, all cultural artifacts, as products of that superstructure, will reproduce this most basic understanding. A particular ideology, reduced to its most basic term in its master signifier, will be viewed as possessing a necessary existence, while it is in fact arbitrary. It *could* be the case that the way the base functions might be different. However, because the master signifier is presented as non-contingent, it cannot be discarded and therefore anything which assumes a different structure is renounced as fantasy. There is nowhere outside of ideology from which to evaluate this condition. Since culture necessarily functions within its own ideology, everyone, as subjects brought up and interpellated in any culture, will already be immersed in a particular viewpoint. Post-Marxist views present more sophisticated analysis which reveal a more complex functioning, rather than a simple one-way ideological mask of the base. Thus, evaluating cultural artifacts in terms of ideology requires an extensive examination of how ideology operates.

Because both historical progress and critical analysis have been a result of human culture, it is evidently possible for there to be awareness and evaluation of ideology itself. Historically, there have been large shifts, such as the transition from Feudalistic to Capitalistic economic systems, as well as more specific changes within cultures as marginal and dissident groups

become assimilated within the dominant system, as demonstrated in feminist and racial equality movements. Marxism itself, as a critical system, is a realization of the ideological functioning of Capitalism. Without any possibility of recognizing the edge of ideology, this criticism would never occur. While the difficulties presented by Eagleton and Zizek suggest there is never a neutral, objective position outside of all ideology, there can be space which reveals that the apparent necessity of the master-signifier is a fantasy itself, and through this exposure the stability of all ideology is thrown into question.

Louis Althusser refined Marx's original definition of ideology, arguing that it is not something which just exists in the superstructure of society. Although it is a product of society, it also penetrates through all levels to the fundamental base through which society originates. However, even within this view he notes that there are limits to ideology, or possible methods of evading it. In response to the question of art, Althusser claims: "*I do not rank real art among the ideologies*, although art does have a quite particular and specific relationship with ideology" (221). He continues by claiming that art "does not give us knowledge in the strict sense, it therefore does not replace knowledge . . . I believe that the peculiarity of art is to 'make us see' . . . 'make us perceive', 'make us feel' something which *alludes* to reality" (Althusser 222). Art, in this view, attains a level of autonomy from ideology. The best art, "real art," does not supply supposed knowledge in response to the world, as ideology does. Rather, works of art open a perception from which the reader can view a wider world and attempt to comprehend the reality that art "alludes" to. This reality is not coincidental with the reality posited through the artificiality of ideology. Art operates on levels beyond specific discourse, and includes emotional and visceral interaction with the content. This view brings ideology itself into focus as something that is not fully consistent with reality as a whole, but has a narrower field of range.

Since art can connect an individual to external reality beyond the common understanding of the local particulars, it becomes detached from the world of ideology.

For Eagleton, the point of literature is to reveal cultural thought which can be used to evaluate social change. Concluding his work *Literary Theory* with the chapter on political criticism, Eagleton claims that all previous theories are in fact political, and argues that there is “no need to drag politics into literary theory . . . it has already been there from the beginning” (169). Literary theory, for Eagleton is:

less an object of intellectual inquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times. . . For any body of theory concerned with human meaning, value, language, feeling and experience will inevitably engage with broader, deeper beliefs about the nature of human individuals and societies, problems of power and sexuality, interpretations of past history, versions of the present and hopes for the future. (170)

Not only is literature most useful in displaying the particular perspectives of its time, revealing notions of truth and power, but, he contends, a literary theory which attempts to ignore political content is itself ideological. He argues further that:

literary theory has a most particular relevance to this political system: it has helped, wittingly or not, to sustain and reinforce its assumptions . . . Even in the act of fleeing modern ideologies, however, literary theory reveals its often unconscious complicity with them, betraying its elitism, sexism or individualism in the very 'aesthetic' or 'unpolitical' language it finds natural to use of the literary text. (Eagleton, “Literary” 171)

The literary nature of a work is just a mask that covers the more important political implications. Additionally, he claims, the political content aligns with the dominant modes of ideology, as “the great majority of the literary theories . . . have strengthened rather than challenged the assumptions of the power-system” (Eagleton, “Literary” 170). While this claim does not suggest that all individual works of literature support the power systems, the idea that all theory does, as it becomes further diversified into fields such as feminism, post-colonialism, gender studies, and

ethnic studies, seems untenable. Illuminating the political nature involved in all of these fields does reveal significant content, but dismissing the dissident possibilities is problematic, as it neglects the actual potential for social change; possibilities which increase as literary theory highlights underlying dynamics.

Regarding the literary work, in addition to dismissing the aesthetic uniqueness of literature, Eagleton claims that “the objects of criticism . . . are in a certain sense contingent and replaceable” (177). This suggests that literature is merely an example of the cultural practices, ignoring the particular character and meaning that each work provides to their receptive culture. Instead of upholding the parallels between literature and other cultural texts, as Eagleton does, literary theory and interpretation should emphasize why literature is a different kind of artifact, categorically distinct from others, rather than separated by degrees of similarity. Because literature is capable of being understood in multiple ways, as other forms of discourse are not, it invites interpretation. For Eagleton, literature as a category is an illusion. It is the whole field which demands study rather than the particular objects, as he admits that it is the “wider context” which should be given priority (Eagleton, “Literary” 178). It is only the final effect which is significant and Eagleton ultimately suggests a replacement of “the illusion of” literary theory with the field of rhetoric, removing the idea of literature as a privileged object, and refuting the idea that aesthetics is separate from “social determinants” (179).

This emphasis concerning the ultimate effect of a literary work is the center of Eagleton’s view. But the effect of what? Is there a constant core of meaning beneath the resulting response? If it is only the reception of a work that matters, as a result of how it functions throughout history, then meaning becomes completely external. Leaving meaning to be determined only by the readership allows for no significance to be found within the internal

construct of the work. Alternatively, if there is something substantial in the internal structure which is effectively brought into culture, then a process of interpretation is necessarily involved. Understanding how well a work produces its intended meaning suggests that the work does indeed have a unique and identifiable meaning which can be defined and evaluated. However, if literature can sustain multiple meanings, then the totality of what the work conveys is not reducible to one definable account. Through the ambiguity of symbolism and imagery, there will always be excesses of meaning which escape, and the intention of the work is incompletely understood. Holding aesthetic significance in importance, a literary theory can acknowledge the political content and context of a work, while recognizing that there are lines of parallel meaning under the surface, in the depth provided by aesthetic form. This second line of meaning, and possibly third, and fourth, etc., corresponds with the surface understanding of the entire work, but the combination provides new associations and insights which are all compatible with the work as a whole.

Eagleton's view suggests that literature need not be interpreted for any distinctive meaning within it, but rather that it should be used for what it can reveal about things outside of itself. Because he dismisses the importance of aesthetic quality as unique and identifiable apart from ideology, he views literature as indistinct from other discourse, and therefore "no more than a branch of social ideologies" (Eagleton, "Literary" 178). This analysis proposes that the assumption of a work to be ideologically "innocent" is naïve and incomplete. However, assuming that a literary work is only of political importance and always supports the power system is incomplete as well. Rather, literature should be assumed as having emerged from a political background. This component, however, is not necessarily just the reinforcement of dominant political assumptions. While a work which achieves the status of literature involves an

overall complexity of meaning, the political content will likely be complex as well, resisting a singular conclusion.

Elaborating on his traditional Marxist view in *Ideology: An Introduction*, Eagleton rejects post-structural skepticism and argues that the concept of ideology becomes empty if there is no *truth* which grounds ideas in reality. Existing in the middle, literature connects theoretical examination of ideology to lived experience. Ideology is not a type of discourse, but rather “a set of effects within discourse” (Eagleton, “Ideology” 194). Claiming that ideology “expresses a will, a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality,” Eagleton argues that “it is fundamentally a matter of fearing and denouncing, reverencing and reviling, all of which then sometimes gets coded into a discourse which looks as though it is describing the way things actually are” (19). This view understands ideology as performative statements rather than descriptive ones. Connections between the fields of aesthetics and ideology begin to appear in his analysis, as both types of content lack an external corresponding “truth” from which they can objectively be evaluated as true or false. Ideological discourse appears to describe the way things actually are when they are not in fact that way. In this way ideology is deceptive. Although Eagleton continues to argue for the similarities, at this point there also seems to be a divergence between aesthetics and ideology in the matter of intent. Art, in contrast, really does seem to describe a reality. It may be a reality only perceived by the writer, or even by the reader, but in some imaginative way it exists as a reality. As such, it does not intend to be deceptive.

The connection between literature and ideology is further developed by Eagleton in the *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, as he continues to note the similarities between ideology and aesthetics as defined by Immanuel Kant in relation to the world of the unknowable noumena. Both realms of discourse stand apart from reason; they rely only on internal structure and coherency. Most

importantly, both art and ideology attempt to connect the subjective individual to a universal reality. In Eagleton's view this is where the danger resides; whatever connects subjects to each other and to a universal can become ideological. Matthew Sharpe has noted that is not just a case of all art being ideological, but in Eagleton's view, the field of aesthetics developed as a way of transmitting ideology deeper into the individual subject, as ideology contains "an irreducible aesthetic component" (96). The *sensus communis* of aesthetic judgments "represents something like an ideal of the type of 'subjective universality' that ideologies aspire to in the political field," as the subjective qualities of art become universally recognized as objective properties (Sharpe 106). Just as the aesthetic object stands between the material and the abstract, ideology becomes the "cement" that holds subjects together, as it contains both "objective and subjective dimensions" (Sharpe 96). Through a personal encounter with the artwork, the subjective experience takes on a necessary quality, and a worldview becomes naturalized. In Eagleton's view, it is "a mark of success that [ideology] will cease to be visible, integrating itself so deeply into the material practices of its subjects as to form their unsurpassable horizon" (Sharpe 104). In this way, he proposes that the aesthetic elements are just rhetorical devices for persuasion, devices which can convincingly persuade a false understanding. Ultimately, in this view, the aesthetic elements of literature merely mask the ideological content, and must be removed in order to see the true nature of the work.

However, even in Eagleton's argument against aesthetic value there seems to be space beyond ideology, as he claims in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* that "if the aesthetic yields us no knowledge . . . it proffers us something arguably deeper: the consciousness, beyond all theoretical demonstration" (85). Eagleton's position demonstrates that aesthetic values relate the individual to conditions "beyond theoretical," which would extend past the ideological. Ideology

must be formed from conceptual elements; otherwise it would be incomprehensible and cease to function in the practical world. Therefore, the aesthetic work which signifies reality as we cannot fully know it, as Eagleton admits, must be larger than ideology itself. If there is an aesthetic component of ideology which is irreducible, that would suggest that there is core aesthetic quality which cannot be transformed as it is put to use as an ideological transmitter, something which escapes and continues to retain an ambiguous and indescribable nature. Ideology, unlike the noumenal world, can be known, as Eagleton and the other Marxists critics have demonstrated. Furthermore, Eagleton admits that aesthetics presents something “deep,” which suggests a wider possibility of understanding. Ideology, in contrast, does not seem to function as deeply. It is the appearance that covers reality. If ideology needs aesthetic form to penetrate into the consciousness of the individual, that process demonstrates that consciousness is already deeper in potential than the extent of ideology. While it seems certain that ideology can seize aesthetic form in order to present itself as true and shortcut logical argument, it seems equally true that non-ideological motivations can use this same technique as well. They can use this “space” beyond the practical to circumvent ideology. The depth of the connection between aesthetics and consciousness then allows for the formation of new concepts that may not correspond to existing ideology.

Zizek similarly argues that every artistic object emerges from an ideological system and contains features of it, but his analysis has several important distinctions from Eagleton’s and is significant in developing the post-Althusserian sense of ideology. Ideology, he argues in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, is not a false consciousness, something which conceals the truth as a positively existing actuality. Rather, ideology is a veil which covers the realization that there is in fact nothing standing behind it; it is foundationless. Because there is no foundation that can be



used as an absolute truth from which multiple ideologies can be evaluated, ideology is the only available understanding when one constructs a view of reality. In the era of post-structural skepticism, ideology not only remains present, but is in fact all that is left. In agreement with Eagleton's view that the non-political is very much political, Zizek contends that fleeing ideology is indeed an ideological position, and his primary argument is to emphasize that history has not progressed to a point that is post-ideological.

In his analysis, Zizek configures his theory of ideology on ideas introduced by the psychologist Jacques Lacan. The first idea is the concept of the *point de capiton*, a master signifier which fixes meaning to a particular point and confers meaning to all subsequent ideas built upon it. Ideologically, Zizek notes, abstract ideas such as "Freedom," "God," "Communism," etc., exist as master signifiers ("Sublime" 112). Additionally, Zizek uses Lacan's psychological structuring scheme of the perception of reality, consisting of the three orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The primary difficulty in understanding reality is the gap between the Real and the Symbolic. We come to understand the world through the Symbolic, all of the cultural structures that organize and structure the world through conceptual thought, such as language, the law, etc. In contrast, the Real is the fundamental actualities which escape this categorization, but which still exerts an influence on "reality" as it is understood. The Real "is an entity which, although it does not exist. . . . has a series of properties – it exercises a certain structural causality, it can produce a series of effects in the symbolic reality of subjects" (Zizek, "Sublime" 183). Thus the Real is raw existence before it is understood in linguistic terms, and it is also what exists "left over" after reality is imperfectly described in language.

In "The Spectre of Ideology," Zizek develops his analysis further, attempting to construct a critique of ideology, noting its "elusive character" which fails to appear where it's most

expected, and emerges when one tries to avoid it (2)., Zizek notes that, paradoxically, “stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it” (“Spectre” 6). Labeling something ideological means that one is already taking an ideological perspective, it is not only a creation of the Symbolic world, but it is the “‘naturalization’ of the symbolic order” which adds authority to its arbitrary existence and makes its Symbolic foundation appear as an absolute (Zizek, “Spectre” 11). The views created out of cultural contexts become regarded as necessary and essential outside of their particular culture. This creates a “pre-constructed space” in which every attempt to be objective or neutral is already determined in relation to the prevailing understanding. As “discursive mechanisms that generate meaning,” Symbolic orders ground all further discourse, fabricating what is considered the natural order of things (Zizek, “Spectre” 17). While generating meaning, rather than directly representing reality, ideology, as a part of this structure, exists only as an interpretation of the world, based upon master signifiers which are not naturally connected to the world they describe. Therefore competing ideologies cannot be comparatively measured as right or wrong, as there is no objective non-interpretation existing at a more fundamental level from which they can be evaluated. Because ideology is an interpretation of all experience, it marks the edge of thought itself, where there is no unincorporated cognitive space. As an ever present condition, Zizek argues, ideology covers up basic antagonisms below the foundation of social existence; it covers up the gaps which the external world produces in the Real. All cultural artifacts, particularly linguistic ones such as literature, will then necessarily contain ideological traces from their authorial construction.

Ideology, as a limited construct, represents the “nontotalizable” or “nonrepresentable . . . complexity of the historical process” (Zizek, “Spectre” 28). It is not, as in in the original Marxist

sense, just false knowledge disseminated to hide the real power structures. Žižek defines “the fundamental dimension of” ideology as:

not simply a 'false consciousness,' an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as '*ideological*' - '*ideological*' is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence - that is the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals 'do not know what they are doing.' (“Sublime” 15)

However, Žižek adds, they do in fact know what they are doing but still do it anyway. As this cynicism arises, ideology continues to function in different modes. Rather than just knowledge, it includes doctrine, belief, and ritual (Žižek, “Spectre” 11). The world only appears post-ideological if the illusion is placed in the realm of knowledge. Because people do not take things seriously, but act as if they do anyway, ideology has moved into the world of action, becoming further immersed in culture, resulting in a world that is far from ideologically neutral. As a way of infusing meaning into the raw existence of the Real which has no inherent sense, ideology exists beyond being just a set of principles, it exists as a function. It masks the nothingness underneath itself, but it not just a mask as it operates with a self-contained acknowledgement of its own non-foundational artificiality. Persisting not as a mask hiding something, but rather as a mask hiding nothing, ideology thereby produces meaning from where there would be none. Those who grip onto ideology do so, not to reject a more genuine truth, but because the rejection of ideology would unravel the fabric of meaning, as Žižek describes:

reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things, the ideological distortion is written into its very essence . . . [it] can reproduce itself only so far as it is ‘misrecognized and overlooked’: the moment we see it ‘as it really is,’ this being dissolves itself into nothingness or, more precisely, it changes into another kind of reality. (“Sublime” 25)

Because it is embedded in the very way ones sees the world, it cannot be detached for examination. Furthermore, what is overlooked “is not the reality but the illusion which is

structuring their reality, their real social activity” (Zizek, “Sublime” 30). The illusion is not contained within a knowledge or understanding of reality, it is rather “already on the side of reality itself” (Zizek, “Sublime” 29-30). This social activity found in reality is then based upon illusion, and activity is where the misunderstanding takes place. Ideology is already at work before it is propagated by the Ideological State Apparatuses described by Althusser; it is built into the fabric of social reality. Ideology is then pressed upon the subject both from the top down, and from the bottom up.

The significant question posed by Zizek’s analysis asks: is there any possible outside to ideology? While there remains a danger that if “we come to ‘know too much,’ to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself,” he does present the possibility of an outside (Zizek, “Sublime” 15). Questioning the apparent assumption that there is an “inherent impossibility of isolating a reality whose consistency is not maintained by ideological mechanisms,” he asks is there “a reality that does not disintegrate the moment we subtract from it its ideological component?” (Zizek, “Spectre” 15). The conclusion he arrives at suggests it is some other kind of understanding, one not conceptual. While:

no clear line of demarcation separates ideology from reality, although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as ‘reality’, we must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive . . . ideology is not all; it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be determined by any positively determined reality – the moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology. (Zizek, “Spectre” 17)

Zizek’s conclusion suggests that the awareness of ideology within cultural practices can best be achieved by replacing ideology with a theory of ideology. Any other attempt, which contains a Symbolic understanding, will fail. Attempts to achieve an “undistorted view of reality,” from which to understand something in a purely objective manner, uninfluenced by any particular

subjective viewpoint, cannot be complete as there will always be a missing “non-symbolized traumatic kernel” of the Real (Zizek, “Spectre” 26).

As an “unconscious fantasy,” ideology structures reality and since it is no longer a condition of knowledge which can be evaluated as false, but rather one embedded into reality, Zizek claims that not only are we far from a non-ideological world, we are even more immersed in it than in the past. However, the Symbolic nature of ideology can eventually reveal itself as incomplete. There is not a “secret” something hiding behind an ideological curtain, the secret is the form of ideology itself, not hiding something, but baselessly supporting reality. Zizek notes the structural weakness, claiming that “(what we experience as) reality is not the ‘thing itself’, it is always-already symbolized, constituted, structured by symbolic mechanisms – and the problem resides in the fact that symbolization ultimately always fails, that it never succeeds in fully ‘covering’ the real,” (“Spectre” 21). The distortions produced by ideological perspectives can help reveal the conditions covered up by social structures. Ideology contains a symptom, “a particular element that subverts its own universal foundation” (Zizek, “Sublime” 16). A critique then must detect “a point of breakdown” within an ideological field which is “at the same time necessary for that field to achieve its closure, its accomplished form” (16). Ideological universals always include particulars which “breaks its unity [and] lays open its falsity” (16). For instance, a society based on “freedom” will include something that the individual is not free to do because it would undermine the overall freedom. Furthermore, as a universal feature, “there is no ideology that does not assert itself by means of delimiting itself from another ‘mere ideology’” (Zizek, “Spectre” 19). There is always an “other”, something that *is-not* to define what *is*. In appearance, what one believes is truth as defined by one’s culture as truth, while an outsider holds incompatible beliefs which seem false, and are therefore just another “ideology.”

However, an understanding of the Symbolic clarifies that there is a limit to any particular ideology, and no single one can attempt to encompass all of reality. It cannot be completely coextensive with all of reality, and it contains its own internal negations, therefore it is not an impenetrable totality.

Ideology is not one Symbolic construct which obscures a more accurate Symbolic system. Rather, it covers the Real, which cannot be understood in conceptual terms. Following Lacan, Žižek defines “reality” as “a fantasy-construction which enables us to mask the Real of our desire and suggests that “the only way to break the power of our ideological dream is to confront the Real of our desire which announces itself in this dream” (“Sublime” 48). Although Žižek argues that there is no objective “God’s view” from which to distinguish reality from ideology, he acknowledges that there is a constant among all the possible contingent constructs: “this constant is the Lacanian Real that ‘remains the same in all possible universes (of observation)’” (“Spectre” 25). When the particulars of any Symbolic system, such as language, culture, and ideology, are isolated, what remains will be consistent with the remains of all other Symbolic systems. This “extra-ideological point of reference that authorizes us to denounce the content of our immediate experience as ‘ideological’ – is not reality but the repressed real of antagonism” (Žižek “Spectre” 25). Thus, for Žižek, an essential aspect of the Real is social antagonism, which is not a class struggle that persists within the higher levels of ideology, but rather something that is repressed, or rejected, from the social constructs of the symbolic. It remains consistent as something more fundamental than any ideological system. Social antagonism, is for Žižek the “inherent limit” that surrounds society, remaining outside of the Symbolic, but forming a base for everything constructed within it. Understanding this condition in relation to the artifacts of culture suggests it is an omnipresent quality. It may, however, be an

incomplete understanding, and additional conditions of the Real may apply as well, other forms of tension and contest that persist as universal qualities throughout reality and are always present in any human experience. Stripped away of their artificial Symbolic constructions, these consistent experiences can be apprehended. As Žižek's analysis suggests, The Real is the only outside of ideology, and how it can be accessed is a difficult notion, but it seems that there is a possibility for artistic representation to provide an impression of it.

The post-Marxist understanding of ideology reveals a problematic nature of literary theory is its attempt to discern clearer understanding. It is not simply a matter of unmasking. Stripping away the extra-ideological content in order to reveal the underlying ideology at work cannot reach a fully fundamental level. What the mask of ideology hides is not a uniform master-ideology which can be seen for what it is, and ultimately unlocked by defining it. The "hard kernel" which is hidden through the ideological process is an external element to the Symbolic construct, it is the Real. As such it cannot be decoded and described in conceptual terms, but remains elusive. The ideological project of literary theory can never be complete, it cannot grasp every element of the work or culture; every reading will fail to map and organize all of the thought contained within a work. Furthermore, the inherent contradictions within an ideological system make it difficult to claim exactly what it *is*. The overall meaning of the master-signifier can be viewed as central, but there will always be cases, as Žižek suggests, that negate or redefine that master-signifier. A final stable and uniform view which would pervade all artifacts produced within a culture and relate them to a particular meaning becomes difficult to ascertain. The bottom, as a stable foundation precisely defining ideology, is unreachable in terms of analysis.

While the claim that all of literature is ideological because of its larger context involving the author and preexisting culture is unavoidably accurate, it must also be the case that the process of interpretation is always ideological. Just as ideology is embedded in the production of written work, it is also embedded in the process of reading and understanding, and critical reactions will already be informed with a pre-determined viewpoint. All critical interpretations will remain conceptual, and remain in an ideological context. Alternatively, when a work is explored for the possibility of meanings which are created as a secondary result of its formal relations and its deliberate construction, something additional arises beyond its surface implications. The aesthetic layer of a literary work, how language is used in an original and creative way to purposely interact with forms and ideas, presents the possibility of extra-ideological meaning. As something extending further in meaning than a conceptual system, the aesthetic essence may be able to provide a view of the Real while emanating from within the Symbolic. The literary work, as it contains aesthetic qualities, does not possess a positively determined certainty in a final sense, but exists as an open and continuing invitation for questions, suggesting alternative views which subsist simultaneously.

Reviewing the continuous Post-Marxist elaboration of ideology, Sharpe agrees that there has not been an end to ideology and, like Žižek and Eagleton, he notes that the danger of ideology is its ability to become invisible as it is integrated deeper and deeper into culture and continues to exert significant influence. “Contemporary cynical reason,” Sharpe argues, “instead shows up the deeper truth of ideology per se – which is that the deepest level of efficacy is beyond subjects’ conscious grasp, at the level of the Freudian unconscious” (108). Although these examinations have revealed it to be a pervasive and extensive element of the social construct which cannot be dismissed as trivial, it is not impossible to find a position outside of it.



Both of these theorists have done that in their attempts at ideology-critique, which “maintain - albeit in a way that neither has rigorously attempted- that ideology is distinguishable from other discourses and social practices, as a species of persuasive discourse whose ‘truth’ – if we wish to continue to use this term at all – will be judged by its fruits” (Sharpe 116). The term “ideology,” he concludes, must be used specifically, as considering all politically persuasive discourse to be ideology would leave no room for an “outside” to ideology.

The possibility of distinguishing ideology from other discourses then needs to be actualized. In order to be able to analyze ideology it must retain a discrete uniqueness that differentiates it from other discourse. Noting what differentiates literature from other writing seems to be a potential starting point for this, as literature contains qualities and features that are not present in all forms of discourse. By centering ideology on a sublime fantasy, a master signifier, Žižek’s conception of it does create an external space, occupied by “the other”. Those who do share the fantasy become a threat to the particular way of life and are exiled into the outside realm of competing ideologies. As a self-sustaining system without appeal to a more fundamental truth, ideology relies on the use of language from which it is constructed. In order to be transmittable and comprehensible, ideology must employ concepts that are explicit and must therefore be sustained by continual reuse of presumed language to support its own internal logic. It must be capable of being contained as a doctrine. In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek refers to the Lacanian realm of the Real where we encounter the *other* as “beyond the wall of language” (49). This description marks the boundary where the explicitness of concepts end and the grasp of ideology ceases. As Sharpe notes, in Žižek’s critique there is always a “remainder” that escapes, as it “exceeds the complete grasp of hegemonic ideology” (108). Any existence found in the Real cannot be captured, and although ideology attempts to use it for its own

purposes, this remainder, until it is transfigured and conceptualized into an ideological form, would seem to be available for the artwork to present as an aesthetic experience free from ideological constraint and pre-interpretation. Art, through its attempts at expanding the horizon of perception, introduces newness into the world, and this newness can disrupt the consistency which supports ideology.

Questions for literary theory arise as a result of Eagleton and Žižek's advanced understanding of ideology. How can literature transcend this cultural state, and what meaning does it provide as an aesthetic construction? If theory resolves the problem of ideology being glossed over and ignored, is it then possible that Eagleton's understanding is an overreaction which misplaces the artistic nature of literature while foregrounding the dynamic forces of culture?

In "Reclaiming the Aesthetic," George Levine argues that this is the case, as the change in literary criticism of the late twentieth century has shifted from interpretation to theory, resulting in "a reductive assimilation of literature to ideology, or to a resistant sense that the literature and the political should have nothing to do with each other" (1). This change in literary study "from questions about what texts might 'mean' to questions about the systems that contain them, about material conditions, hermeneutics, mediation, [and] discourse" has transformed it into a study of culture where "literature is all too often demeaned, [and] the aesthetic experience denigrated or reduced to mystified ideology" (Levine 2-3).

In response, Levine proposes that the aesthetic is "a mode engaged richly and complexly with moral and political issues, but a mode that operates differently from others and contributes in distinctive ways to the possibilities of human fulfillment and connection" (3). This understanding of literature as a "'distinct' human activity" must be continually recognized as

such in order to keep literature from becoming just a resource for anthropology and to avoid “the sort of reductivism that comes to equate aesthetics with ideology, or to subsume it under ideology” (Levine 8). In challenging the theoretical dismissal of “the aesthetic as a strategy of mystification of the status quo,” Levine argues that the aesthetic cannot be understood in the same way as other types of discourse (3). Because of its nature, which provides multiplicity of meaning and concerns questions of value, literature cannot be defined with the same singular precision in regard to meaning. As Levine suggests, the aesthetic realm provides “free play” which can result in political views becoming “short circuited” and “provides a space where the immediate pressures of ethical and political decisions are deferred, so it allows sympathy for, and potential understanding of people, events, things otherwise threatening” (17). While there may always be underlying political content, “the aesthetic has no particular political commitments. It leaves itself open to endless and indeterminate interpretations. It offers, in the options society can create, the closest thing to ‘free choice,’ the least oppressive of its forms” (Levine 18).

Levine’s articulation of the state of theory suggests that centering the focus back on the aesthetic nature of literature is indispensable in challenging the ideological forces at work. By elevating the discussion into an aesthetic realm, literature can become an active part of that political contest. It creates an open field for the reader to evaluate the political conditions and choose what to emphasize and pursue as important. By “deferring” any political conclusions, aesthetic works can reflect on the given ideological field, and if not politically neutral, can, at least, allow for alternate views to come into contact with the normalized conditions and prompt a continued modification or evolution of them. Awareness of the potential of the aesthetic to reconfigure the political discussion, rather than allowing aesthetic form to be a passive device to be used by political motivations, is a key element in articulating what makes literature a unique

class of discourse. Through the process of interpretation and consideration of the work, the reader can be individually moved as an agent, detached from the mass of society. While a work may indicate the magnitude of past ideological forces, there is an openness in relation to the future as the work continues to exert meaning. Neither the work nor the reader must be confined to the state of thought previously embedded within the culture.

Peter Brooks is another voice in the argument that poetics has been lost in the study of literature. In “What Happened to Poetics?,” he suggests that the “play of the aesthetic” resides alongside the creation of language as a significant part of human activity, “trumping the aesthetic by the ideological and political – making the aesthetic simply as a mask for the ideological- risks losing a sense of the functional role played by the aesthetic within human existence” (Brooks 160). Arguing that ideology does not encompass all of human life, Brooks claims:

More than politics in the usual acceptation, it is cultural politics that absorb much of our anxiety about values. And, if this demonstrates that culture is indeed the realm of ideological debate, it nonetheless confirms that culture, including the aesthetic, is a constituted realm that cannot simply be reduced to ideology. (162)

Culture, although built on the same foundation as ideology, is something larger than it, including all of the aesthetic appreciation of the world that is put into play by humanity which expands life beyond the purely functional.

Poetics, in his view, is the most important component of aesthetic form since it relates to the production of meaning, and through poetics literature creates value which is beyond ideology. Rather than bypassing the aesthetic in any reading, the reader must “slow up the work of interpretation, the attempt to turn the text into some other discourse or system” in order to consider the possibilities of the work. What the reader “needs,” argues Brooks, is to:

encounter a moment of poetics- a moment in which they are forced to ask not only *what* the text means but also *how* it means, what its grounds as a meaning-making sign-system

are, and how we as readers, through the competence we have gained by reading other texts, activate and deploy systems that allow us to detect or create meaning and to rationalize and order meanings in categorical ways. (160-61)

The position Brooks asserts here suggests a much more active engagement between the reader and the work. The moment of poetics, the point of aesthetic experience, is what literature is about, and should be allowed to take place before the reader transposes that experience into a conceptual form that can be used to build new layers of meaning through understanding.

Meaning is “created,” “rationalized” and “ordered” by the reader. Rather than being a passive recipient of an ideological transmission, the reader creates new meaning out of the aesthetic presentation and decides as a matter of value-judgment how that meaning compares to existing ones. The attention to meaning-making is also important, as it realizes that new meaning is created and that the literary does not just recycle existing notions. Furthermore, Brooks contends that critical positions which assert the primacy of ideology, like Eagleton’s, assume “a measure of moral arrogance” in which the analyst knows more than the author, text, or reader (164).

Rather, he counters, “one cannot claim to speak for the text until one has attempted to let the text speak though itself” (Brooks 165).

The concise point Brooks articulates here suggests the most reasonable method of approaching literature. While there are certainly political and ideological notions residing within a work which can later be revealed for other gains in knowledge, they should not become the primary concern of reading. Reading only for ideological content risks projecting ideology into the work where it was not previously present. Additionally, just as the reader, or critic, should not attempt to dominate the work, it should not attempt to dominate the reader to force an ideological conclusion, as that would diminish the artistic priority that the work attempts to achieve. While Brooks does not fully consider how ideological immersion can be overcome and

viewed from an external position, his claims supporting the importance of poetic meaning suggest that the aesthetic characteristics of a literary work provide meaning on alternate levels which transcend the ideological content.

Similarly, Lou F. Caton argues that recent theory has not resolved the conflicts found within literature, but has just reversed the privileged position and “now ideology, not aesthetics, totally interprets literary production” (64). This new model, following Eagleton, views aesthetics as nothing but “a sham that masks crucial relations” and “simply an illusion” which arises from the specific ideological content of a social context (Caton 67). The point of studying literature has simply become the “social investigations of materialism” (Caton 67).

In contrast to recent theory, Caton attempts to resolve the dualism, and frames the problem as one between formalism and ideology, arguing that the tension between ideology and aesthetic form is what actually produces the significant meaning. Anti-formalist criticism can make works representative of the local culture only. A recognition of formalism, however, reveals the universal relevance of the work, as “attention to aesthetic form . . . provides an idealistic counter-force to the important but limited materialism of politics and ideology” (Caton 66). He argues that dismissing aesthetic form for ideological content is counterproductive, as both are necessary for discerning meaning; form makes the material content intelligible.

Rather than viewing literature as allegory, which creates practical parallels, Caton argues that it should be viewed as symbolic. Considering the view of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he finds resolution in the symbol which creates unity and overcomes the difference between discrete components, unlike metaphor. Symbols point to an idealistic state beyond the material world of ideology, a realm “which is unspeakable, unknowable, and beyond the conceptual mind” and “never aligns itself with only one ideology or one history” (Caton 70). Through the universality

of aesthetics, “form embodies the clash between history and idealism in terms of the temporal and eternal, [and] it can operate as a bridge between diverse ideological cultures” (Caton 72). It is through the aesthetic form of the symbol that “all culture can experience [the] idealized moment when temporal concepts (i.e., the mortal, interested concerns of ideology and history) create a certain form (the symbol) that reveals eternity (i.e., the metaphysical, disinterested concerns of idealism)” (Caton 70). The symbol attempts to reveal the world of Kant's noumena to "create a single idealistic moment," but it can never completely bring the ideal into the material, as “the translucent experience . . . never completely exits the temporal, ideological world. It offers only a foggy glimpse of the unreachable, beckoning ideal of a pure, disinterested formalism, and it always does so through the material world” (70). Although this revelation of the ideal is only “foggy”, it does contribute to importing meaning into the existing world.

Symbolism, Caton continues:

gives the reader a new fact, a new experience, rather than the material commentary that primarily springs from allegory . . . because symbol's form always adds up to more than its merged parts, the symbol gives us something new, something that cannot exist in the finite, propositional world of ideology.” (70 -71)

Precise definition of these symbols is impossible, as “these ideal symbols are inaccessible, ‘transcendental’ in that they are ‘outside’ experience. We can have no clear concrete grounding for ideals because they are not organized through conceptual understandings” (Caton 72).

However, Caton realizes that the symbol retains all of its original meanings even when it is formed from differentiated concepts and "this makes no rational sense; hence, the recognition that all symbols are contradictions" (69). Art, through its symbolic nature, is beyond the rationally intelligible structure of logic.

The idea that aesthetic properties, and the symbols they work through, involve contradictions shows that the ideas they attempt to represent cannot be placed into propositional terms. Therefore, symbolic or poetic works cannot do the same kinds of things that the performative statements of doctrine can. The ambiguity found within them makes them less optimal for achieving a specific result, as ideology would attempt to do. They can, however, ultimately do more than that kind of discourse can with its restricted language. Revising them into less contradictory statements destroys part of the contained meaning, as it confines aesthetic elements into an artificial rationalized limitation.

Caton's view contributes to the escape of ideology by pointing to the world outside of language, the noumena, or the Real in Lacanian terms, and suggests a method of accessing it through the symbol. Furthermore, this view acknowledges that aesthetic form produces something "new" beyond ideological concepts which are "propositional." However, his formalism relies upon a realm of universal ideals; for him aesthetics is "the universal form of [the symbol's] structure" (Caton 70). In his view, these newly formed concepts, brought into the material world through language, were already pre-existing, as a Platonic form would be. This conflicts with the idea of "newness" in art. He mentions concepts like justice, dignity, and community (Caton 71). However, these concepts have historically developed over time and been experienced differently in the context of various cultures. It seems doubtful that one reads literature in order to clearly perceive ideas of this nature, looking for a demonstration of something like perfect justice. It is ideology, rather, that offers the apparently pure conceptual conditions that society attempts to attain.

While Caton's argument reinforces the importance of aesthetic form and realizes the integrated nature of ideology in any literary work, it does present problems regarding idealistic



forms. Rather than viewing the objects of aesthetic inquiry as universal forms, but rather as simply the unarticulated experience of the Real, the problems of idealism can be avoided. If concepts like democracy, justice, and equality are experienced as evolving ideas rather than entering the world as fully formed pre-existing ideas, then they must be something introduced at some point as new. This newness, the introduction of the novel idea, is one function that art performs, providing something that helps break through the rigid forms of ideology and energizes progress. The meaning proposed by an aesthetic form does not have to be a concept which has an eternal, immaterial, and ontologically distinct existence. Rather, what the aesthetic can reveal is the raw, undefined experience of reality which has existence prior to meaning. Specific discourse of a particular political context attempts to reduce description of the Real into a Symbolic expression, confining it in linguistic terms which are unable to fully encompass the depth of experience. Literature, through expression at the level of aesthetic form adds layers of meaning beyond the literal surface meaning and rediscovers some of this depth. The reader is then directed toward contemplating the raw experience which is consistent across all cultures, despite political particulars, as experience which is universal, but encountered within the limitations of the material world. It points toward the pre-ideological, before experience becomes sliced up, processed, and contained within a certain set of concepts which are bound to an ideological master-signifier that limits thought within the space of ideas surrounding, and connected to, that particular point.

As one example of recent theory, William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* is widely regarded as an allegory of colonial expansion. Ideologically, the play could be said to promote and defend the British assimilation of the New World. As a highly aesthetic work, containing expressive use of language and dramatic narrative, it is obvious that any particular reading will

be incomplete and fail to address all of the multivalent properties of the play. Superficially, themes concerning the nature of drama and the existence of the self stand out as much as the confrontation between cultures and the disproportionate distributions of power which arise from such confrontations.

Meredith Anne Skura, in “Discourse and the Individual: The Case of Colonialism in *The Tempest*,” has argued against such interpretations and their inherent potential danger, as criticism of *The Tempest* has shifted away from overly narrow readings of the play as “a self-contained project of a self-contained individual” which ignored the political context, to criticism fully engaged with the historical situation (46). While attempting to overcome a “blindness” to ideological context, this recent criticism:

not only flattens the text into the mold of colonialist discourse and eliminates what is characteristically ‘Shakespearian’ in order to foreground what is ‘colonialist,’ but it is also –paradoxically- in danger of taking the play further from the particular historical situation in England in 1611 even as it brings it closer to what we mean by ‘colonialism’ today. (47)

This much broader interpretation is potentially too wide and ignores “traditional insights about the text, its immediate sources, its individual author – and his individual psychology” (47). This method risks a “circularity of definition” that assumes the presence of ideological content, and then proceeds to “discover” it within the text (47). In hindsight, criticism can reveal the trends which have advanced the colonialist project, but without the concept of such an idea existing as a valid articulation in 1611 the emergence of it into the foreground is limited to a contemporary understanding. Interpretation must avoid this pre-determined conclusion. Rationalizations or justifications of the political unconscious from the point of origin, Skura argues, must be taken into account, “otherwise interpretation not only destroys the text – here *The Tempest*- as a unique work of art and flattens it into one more example of the master plot –or master ploy- in

colonialist discourse; it also destroys the evidence of the play as a unique cultural artifact, a unique voice in the discourse” (51). In response to the ideology of the time, Skura finds particular scenes advancing an anti-colonialist view, as the play “qualifies Prospero’s scorn by showing Caliban’s virtues,” and reveals Prospero’s acknowledgement of his own tendency toward colonialization (49). While the political unconscious of the culture is contained within the play, Skura suggests that the process of interpretation must recognize the presence of a personal conscious at work within the authorship and concludes that Shakespeare’s participation in colonialist ideology was not mere reproduction, but a process of “crossing it with other discourses, changing, enlarging, skewing, and questioning it” (69).

Skura’s point of differentiating today’s understanding of colonialism in relation to the understanding of the time is an important one. While *The Tempest* is put to use as an example of Western culture’s exclusion of “the other,” that aspect is not necessarily an inherent meaning of the play. In the case of *The Tempest*, “colonialism” did not exist as a coherent idea and, without a defined field of discourse relating to it, discussion of such trends would have to exist without clear terms to oppose it. As ideology produces the norms and defines the limit for what is not included, those in excluded positions begin to crystalize their own identity. Historically, as imperialist motivations pushed Western culture further beyond European borders, the encounter with “the other” eventually allowed for the idea of “colonialism” to evolve as a concrete idea and become a criticism for evaluation of the dominant, reflecting back on historic progress. Shakespeare’s language in reference to Caliban appears, superficially, to propagate the dominant ideology of the superiority of European civilization. Addressing his uncivilized nature as a “vile race,” Shakespeare brings into the foreground what would have existed in the presupposed background of cultural thinking. By explicitly involving such terms in dramatic situations, the

normalized truth is called into question. Furthermore, the critical connections between the wider cultural practices and the work as a particular view of that practice may not achieve a complete consistency. As an artistic creation, the play must be understood as emanating from an individual point of view which cannot be identical to the collective cultural point of view. Even though the personal thoughts and intentions of the author cannot be known, the work is to some degree detached from the total cultural practice, and the resulting process of individual authorship differentiates the work from a purely cultural product. Although any resulting work cannot escape containing political viewpoints in relation to the prevailing ideology, the internal ambiguities can change the angle of relation to the dominant view.

Barbara Fuchs has also pointed out that such a reading can be an oversimplification, and even a colonialist interpretation must uncover the multiple layers that contribute to the political construction of the work. In “Conquering Islands: Contextualizing *The Tempest*,” she notes that “it is an axiom of contemporary criticism that *The Tempest* is a play about the European colonial experience in America” (Fuchs 265). Placing America at the center of interpretation, in her view, “has made it fundamentally more interesting and, at least for twentieth-century readers, a more relevant text.” This assertion suggests, in agreement with Jonathan Culler, that use is more interesting than interpretation. However, Fuchs argues that it is an advantage in political criticism to consider “all relevant colonial contexts simultaneously” and contends that the play can lead to multiple historical interpretations (266). While more engaging for contemporary audiences, an interpretation based only on a New World reading “runs the risk of obscuring the complicated nuances of colonial discourses.” (Fuchs 265). Meaning is ultimately more complicated, and Fuchs adds that “just as formal literary elements of a text - metaphors, puns, patterns –may signify in multiple ways, context, too, may be polysemous” (Fuchs 266).

Imperialism in the Americas, she claims, should be understood as a parallel to British expansion into Ireland. Furthermore, the Mediterranean setting of the play represents Islamic expansion into Europe. All of these political situations exist “superimposed” in the play, as “quotations” of each other (266). While references to previous exploration and assimilation “advances a colonialist ideology,” Fuch notes Michael Neill’s argument that such quotations can also “serve to counter colonialism” and escape working “entirely to the conquerors’ advantage” (268n). As a conquering group identifies the colonized inhabitants as an “other,” those inhabitants can be organized around such labels and strengthen their own national identities.

As suggested by Fuchs, *The Tempest* is a “complex and polysemous” work where “multiple dimensions come together” (285). If these multiple levels of content are ignored, then the play becomes “isolated somewhere in the Americas,” and a significant amount of potential meaning becomes rejected. Viewing the play as predominantly an aesthetic reworking of the cultural forces, rather than a simple product of those forces, allows the specific contexts and ideologies to retain their significance independently, while telling a larger story that is applicable to all of them.

In contrast to the prominent ideological themes uncovered by theory, the criticism of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, published in 1836, stands out. In his opinion:

*The Tempest* is a specimen of the purely romantic, in which the interest is not historical, or dependent upon fidelity of portraiture, or the natural connexion of events, - but is the birth of the imagination, and rests only on the coadaptation and the union of the elements granted to, or assumed by the poet. It is a species of drama which owes no allegiance to time or space, and in which, therefore, errors of chronology and geography – no mortal sins in any species- are venial faults, and count for nothing. It addresses itself entirely to the imaginative faculty. (Coleridge 121)

Concluding that the language of the work is “for all ages,” Coleridge’s criticism emphasizes the universality of the dramatized situation while overlooking the concrete particularities in order to

show aesthetic transcendence (125). This approach does lack an awareness of the specific political and cultural currents that shift over time, and although it is incomplete, it also reveals what is lacking in theory: the more general meanings that rise above contextual origins. If theory ties the work too closely to the place and time of its origin, this aesthetic approach largely disconnects the work from the world, presenting it in an abstract environment which disengages the reader. A more conditioned response, allowing both cultural and aesthetic analysis to take place simultaneously increases the possibility for more meanings to emerge, and increases the value of a work.

The possible meanings found within *The Tempest* are most apparent in relation to central characters, namely Prospero, rather than Shakespeare's intention as an author, or the originating culture. Nevertheless, the artistic nature of the language creates a wealth of harmonic meaning that includes all these layers. This is perhaps most prominent in Prospero's speech in Act IV, scene 1:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1.146-158)

A central idea within *The Tempest* involves the disorder that surrounds artificial order. The natural world ultimately holds a priority over the political inter-subjective world of social constructs. Prospero's place within a political hierarchy of the civilized world is not a natural one, containing stability and certainty, but is rather one based on cultural tradition and conflict,

legitimized by a self-constructed authority which can be usurped. Although restoration to the rightful state of things occurs at the end of the play, the fragile, contingent, and insubstantial, nature of this order begins to appear underneath the surface world.

Showing a self-awareness, this notion has many layers of meaning revolving around the awareness of a larger structure beyond the narrative, and beyond Shakespeare's own biographical experience of the stage. Prospero's own island, existing in a world of magic apart from the political civilized world is a parallel to the world of drama existing apart and within the "real" world. Within the theme of art versus nature, Prospero's speech describes an artificiality to the reality we experience, a world constructed through culture and human endeavor that is not essential. It therefore calls into question everything that is assumed as having a naturalized existence. Suggesting a layered reality, there is a hint here at the divide between the Lacanian orders of the Real and the Symbolic, the Real being a disordered foundation to reality, while experienced reality is understood through Symbolic means of language and culture. In this case, a Lacanian understanding of reality is not embedded within the work; it is not an interpretation waiting to be revealed, or decoded, as correct. However, like the Freudian understandings of psychology brought into interpretations of *Hamlet*, there is a vague notion present within the work which eventually becomes understood in more precise terms as new theoretical frameworks become available. As a story of the struggle between two worlds, one naive and simple, and one made complex and corrupt, the work may support a view of the artificiality of culture, in which the political hierarchy is not a natural condition. At one level, Žižek's view of reality as a fragile construct which can be undone by "too much" knowing is dramatically presented. *The Tempest* suggests that the world of ideology is all we have, as an artificial construct in an unorganized nature, but as such that structure can be modified.

As an artistic work, *The Tempest* does not promote a single ideological position and does not advance one by covering it up. Rather, by foregrounding the notion of colonialization, it creates space for an ideological discourse, inspiring analysis of different views for consideration. As much as a literary work reveals the dominant ideology, it also reveals the traces of conflict within a society. Art becomes the field where ideas can be brought into play, a step which is a necessary precursor before they can develop into categorical terms for discourse and analysis.



## **Chapter 2: Interpretation, Overinterpretation and Use**

In determining meaning, particularly political meaning in relation to the culture, there arises a problem of intention. Suggesting that the final work is completely detached from any intention, or conscious input of the author in relation to culture, results in the literary process becoming mere transmission, and ignores active agency. However, since the author's intention cannot be fully known, there is a gap between the work and its origin. In some cases there is simply no supplemental information about the author, or there is no further commentary from the author. Even in cases where this supplementary material exists, it remains detached from the work, as another level of discourse, and not an integral part of the aesthetic result. When the original ideas are incorporated into a literary form, the possibilities of meaning become multiplied. Just as this gap between the work and the author exists, a broader level of removal persists, existing as a distance between the work and the context of its origin. If the author cannot have final say over the meaning of a work, then neither can the culture, which exists as a preliminary background before the active process of writing.

The acts of writing and reading are individual experiences: the writer contemplates ideas in relation to the larger world, and the reader uses the work to aid in reflection on his or her own relation to the world. Throughout this process only the work itself as a medium, a static artifact, remains stable. The ideas proposed by the author become transposed as they are encoded into the linguistic terms that constitute the work. As the reader decodes these linguistic structures, his or her own conceptions, understandings, and cultural contexts influence the resulting interpretation, which creates another transposition. The literary nature of the work bypasses the cognitive structure that a linear, logical argument would provide, allowing multiple influences to color the meaning. Therefore the exact experience of a particular literary work will always vary, and the

experience of the reader will not coincide with the experience of the writer. While there are nearly unlimited possibilities of meaning for any work, if the most precise encounter of it as literature is a concern, the reader cannot casually use the work, but must be a critical, or responsible, reader and actively engage with the work. The responsible reader is one who realizes that a work consists of many layers which provide alternate senses of meaning, ones that not even the author can fully realize. But, this reader will also be aware that not just any interpretation or understanding will be faithful to the work itself, and must differentiate between meaning which is consistent with the unique work and “use” which views the work in the realm of external context and decentralizes meaning outside of the work.

Umberto Eco has introduced the idea of *overinterpretation*, a condition where the reader injects his or her own ideas into the interpretation of the work, resulting in a meaning that is not fully supported. As the reader analyzes a work, he or she will look for the features expected to be there, and interpret what is there in relation to that expectation, ultimately finding grounds for his or her own pre-supposed ideas. If this method is considered valid, then all attempts at interpretation fail. If all interpretations are correct, then none are correct, in the sense of being tightly based on the work as the source. There has to be a limit to the acceptable interpretations, Eco argues. Furthermore, Eco suggests that there is a division between interpretation and use of literature. As cultural products, literary works undoubtedly reveal traits of the originating culture, many of which were probably transparent to the author. Through analysis, like that of literary theory, the work is understood historically in the cultural context, and these patterns can be cognitively revealed. In this way literature can be effectively used to provide further understanding. However, these ideas were not intentionally employed in the creation of the

work. Acknowledging this involvement of the author places limits of the possible interpretations which can be said to accurately result from examining the work.

In *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Eco argues that literary interpretation has a point where the discovered interpretations begin to lose focus on meanings emerging directly from the work, resulting in overinterpretation that allows external influences to color the meaning of the work. Interpretation, if it is to continue as a valid term, must have a respect for the work while it takes into consideration the “cultural and linguistic background” (Eco, “Overinterpretation” 69). In Eco’s view, “every act of reading is a difficult transaction between the competence of the reader (the reader’s world knowledge) and the kind of competence that a given text postulates in order to be read in an economic way” (68). Literature is constructed specifically with the understanding that readers will have to make interpretations, and contains a certain amount of complexity beneath the apparent surface. Therefore, there are certain expectations involved in making interpretations that the reader will need to recognize. As a result of this complexity, there are no definite “correct” interpretations that could be discovered, even with help from the author. However, that does not mean that all interpretations avoid being equally misplaced. Eco argues that “if there are no rules that help to ascertain which interpretations are the ‘best’ ones, there is at least a rule for ascertaining which ones are ‘bad’” (52). Defining a good interpretation involves consistency with other parts of the work that avoids any contradictions with “explicit aspects” of it, as:

The only way is to check it upon the text as a coherent whole . . . any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it confirmed by, and must be rejected if it is challenged by, another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader. (Eco, “Overinterpretation” 65)

Interpretation should center itself on the work as the primary source material that guides the

discovery of meaning.

Within this process of interpreting the literary work, Eco notes that there is “a non-literal sense to be detected . . . beyond and beneath the literal sense” (54). These multiple layers of meaning are all appropriate sources to consider in constructing interpretations. Eco adds:

It is legitimate for a reader to find what he finds in the text, because the associations are, at least potentially, evoked by the text, and because the poet might (perhaps unconsciously) have created some ‘harmonics’ to the main theme. If it is not the author, let us say it is the language which has created this echo effect. (62)

It is these “harmonic” effects produced through aesthetic construction that make literature distinct from other discourse. Through psychological factors, as well as the restrictions and enhancements produced by available language, meaning is complexified, and depth is added, creating a more interesting cultural product which is worthy of study as something in itself. The use of language in a way that has inherent multiplicity of meaning, and supports rather than reduces this quality, will project meaning beyond any original sense, causing the work to be somewhat distanced from its point of origin.

While Eco does place some importance on the intention of the author, who could *possibly* rule out bad interpretations which distort the intended meaning of the work, he also recognizes that the work will involve more than just the writer’s intention. Since the actual author cannot even be aware of the totality of meanings produced, he or she could merely reject interpretations in relation to particular elements considered in the creation of a work. However, the author cannot validate, positively or negatively, all of the possible meanings, and must remain, in Eco’s term “silent.” Ultimately, the “empirical author’s intention [is] radically useless,” and Eco attempts to avoid the problems of considering authorial intention (66). Rather, he attempts to support the “rights of the text” which exist “independently of the author,” and proposes that there

is an intention of the work, the *intentio operis*, which is distinct from the intention of the author.

This intention guides meaning which is coherent with the entire work, but which is beyond the conscious awareness of the author. By shifting priority to the work and “respecting the text,” the significant meanings can be found within the work itself. By centering on the work, the process of interpretation asks “if what is found is what the text says by virtue of its textual coherence and of an original underlying signifying system, or what the addressees found in it by virtue of their own systems of expectations” (Eco, “Overinterpretation” 64).

If the resulting discoveries are coherent with the work, the conclusions can accurately be considered *interpretations*. Although the reader does not have to understand the psychological intentions of the author, the originating context of the work must be kept in mind, and meaning must be understood in the language of the time, as forcing modern connotations into words distorts the original meaning of the work itself. If, however, the discovered meaning is not consistent with all parts of the work, and the reader has injected his or her own expectations into the work, the result will be overinterpretation. The conclusions of this type fall into a category that Eco defines as *use* (“Limits” 62). The result is something different from interpretation and, as meaning is decentered, the work becomes one part of a larger idea or system and serves as an example of that external entity.

Rather than being two purely distinct methods of approaching a literary work, Eco claims that there are points where interpretation and use overlap, and the reader can do both simultaneously. He suggests that “it is reasonable that the reader has the right to enjoy all of [the] echo effects that the text qua text provides him or her. But at [a certain] point the act of reading becomes a *terrain vague* where interpretation and use inextricably merge together” (Eco, “Limits” 71). Eco, then, acknowledges that there is a point where a work can provide meaning

external to itself and reveal aspects of language or culture larger than the work's immediate range of concern, while remaining internally consistent. This kind of use remains important, as the work can tell the reader something about itself, while commenting on cultural phenomena at the same time. As long as this use remains consistent with the work as a coherent whole, it remains viable as an interpretation. However, as use overtakes interpretation, it becomes ever more important to remain focused on the work itself if one is attempting to say something about the work as it is.

The claim that there is the possibility of "bad" interpretations is further expanded on by Eco in *The Limits of Interpretation*, where he considers a Medieval understanding of interpretation, and views aesthetics as "a secret science of symbols as intuitive revelations that can be neither verbalized nor conceptualized . . . something that sends one back to a mysterious and self-contradictory reality" (18). Since symbols lead to further symbols, deferring definition, Eco claims that "the meaning of a text is postponed. The only meaning of a text is 'I mean more.'" (27). While symbols are themselves open to infinite possibilities, the meanings constructed from them are finite in terms of "interpretations allowed by the context" of the work (Eco, "Limits" 21). This does not mean that "a text has a unique meaning, guaranteed by some interpretive authority. It means, on the contrary that any act of interpretation is a dialectic between openness and form, initiative on the part of the interpreter and contextual pressure" (21). The interpretive goal Eco strives for is a middle path between "two poles," avoiding the search for one specific interpretation that may have been intended by the author and put into code within the work, and on the other side, "unlimited semiosis" where the work can mean anything that a reader wants it to mean. For Eco:

to reach an agreement about the nature of a given text does not mean either (a) that the interpreters must trace back to the original intention of its author or (b) that such a text must have a unique a final meaning. There are . . . “open” texts that support multiple interpretations, and any common agreement about them ought to concern just their open nature and the textual strategies that make them work that way . . . even though the interpreters cannot decide which interpretation is the privileged one, they can agree on the fact that certain interpretations are not contextually legitimated. (41)

The literary work, unlike other types of discourse, is “conceived in order to magnify such a semiotic possibility” (45) and contains “certain structural devices that elicit interpretive choices” (50). There is an intentional attention to the possibilities that will be recognized, and the author will encourage such magnification. Nevertheless, the work retains a particular core that remains from the authorial construction which, at least, sets a direction for the worldview that emerges from it. Although the work stands as the one fixed point from which interpretations can be evaluated, Eco acknowledges that previous criticism and interpretation come into play, “since any new interpretation enriches the text,” adding to the history and significance surrounding a particular work.

An artistic work, in Eco’s terms, invites reading by a “critical interpreter.” This reader will retain an awareness of the centrality of the work and will interpret in order to say something about the work and not about something external to it. Critical interpretation “means to read it in order to discover, along with our reactions to it, something about its nature. To use a text means to start from it in order to get something else, even accepting the risk of misinterpreting it from the semantic point of view.” (Eco, “Limits” 57). This critical interpreter is “entitled to try infinite conjectures,” but that does mean that all of them are valid, or equally applicable (59). In Eco’s view:

To defend the rights of interpretation against the mere use of a text does not mean that texts must never be used. We are using texts every day and we need to do so, for respectable reasons. It is only important to distinguish use from interpretation . . . every

empirical reading is always a mixture of both . . . Sometimes to use texts means to free them from previous interpretations, to discover new aspects of them, to realize that before they had been illicitly interpreted, to find out a new and more explicative *intentio operis*, that too many uncontrolled intentions of the readers had polluted and obscured. (62)

The distinction is important if one wants to retain the exclusive qualities that give literature a discrete and unique presence among all cultural artifacts.

While overinterpretation is the projection of pre-determined meaning into the interpretation of a work, it could be argued that dismissing certain possibilities of interpretation is really a problem of underinterpretation. This is the position that Jonathan Culler takes as a response to Eco in *The Literary in Theory*, arguing that all interpretations are good because they can provide something useful. Because he sets limits, stopping the process of interpretation and disallowing continuing possibilities, what Eco is really proposing, in Culler's view, is underinterpretation. Culler claims that interpretation is most interesting when it is "extreme" (167). Pushing interpretations past ones which are moderate, reserved, and safe, will create better attempts at finding characteristics which will have more impact. Arguing that the problem, "if anything [is] underinterpretation: a failure to interpret enough elements of the [work] and a failure to look at actual prior texts to find in them concealed [meanings]," Culler places emphasis in the contextual relations between works, moving the locus of meaning outside of a work (169). This externalization places emphasis on factors which were not present during the creation of the work, and therefore may add to a modification of meaning. Culler reformulates the problem of overinterpretation using the term *overstanding*, conceived by Wayne Booth. Overstanding "consists of pursuing questions that the text does not pose to its model reader," as opposed to understanding which "is asking the questions and finding the answers that the text insists on" (Culler 172). What is really important is not an accurate interpretation, but rather what the work



does, as Culler contends:

If interpretation is reconstruction of the intention of the text, *intentio operis*, then these are questions that do not lead that way; they are about what the text does and how; how it relates to other texts and to other practices, what it conceals or represses, what it advances or is complicitous with. Many of the most interesting forms of modern criticism ask not what the work has in mind but what it forgets; not what it says but what it takes for granted. (173)

Supporting Eagleton's view that literature is inextricable from the power relations of a culture, Culler's explanation of overstanding coincides well with the goals of literary theory. Literature provides a wealth of knowledge about "other practices," involving the originating culture and ideology. But theory is something larger and external to literature itself, and Culler's view does not specifically refute Eco's, but rather reveals a different goal as the end point in the course of understanding literature. For Eco, the most significant aspect is the meaning and experience a reader receives from the work. Culler's emphasis on what a work omits, "forgets," and "takes for granted" proposes that literature is either a passive transmitter of the larger cultural forces, which the author does not recognize, or that it advances such forces by actively omitting an articulation of them, which further assists in suppressing challenges to them. Ultimately, in either case, the real substantial subjects of study become these forces. This thinking supports what Alan Sinfield labels an "entrapment model," which can disregard the active change produced by literature as dissident ideologies emerge. If the most interesting aspect of literary work is not what inquiries "the texts insists upon," but rather those not of immediate concern, then literature becomes generic source material for study, and the unique aesthetic character of each work is stripped away.

The role of literary theory, Cullers argues, should not always be viewed as attempting interpretations. Just as linguistics describes language in a systematic structure, without defining

particular content, criticism should not be viewed as “proposing new meanings,” but rather describing the systems of literature (Culler 176). Culler proposes that:

Often what seems a biased critical interpretation giving excess weight to some factors and or structures and neglecting others should be seen, rather, as an attempt to understand the system of possibilities of literature, the general mechanisms of narrative, of figuration, of ideology, and so on. (176)

Culler makes an interesting point regarding the form and content of the work. Analyzing how a work is constructed, structured, functions, etc., can disassemble the work into its components without changing the meaning of the content which is aesthetically unique. However, it seems important to differentiate the meta-literary study of a work’s structure and relation to culture, from the aesthetic experience derived from the particular details of the content within its form. The latter is important, not for determining how or why it works, but for what it actually does as it is encountered by a reader. This marks an important difference between experience and study. When reading for sublime enlightenment, one does not need to keep literary analysis in the forefront of thinking, just as listening to a symphony does not require a working understanding of music theory and an awareness of the discrete elements involved. Those systems and structures either become transparent as the work accomplishes its own design, or they become a distraction by standing out in front of the work while the content retreats into the background and experience is transformed into understanding. As a form possessing concrete content, literature contains even more meaning that is unique and identifiable with the work than abstract artistic works built primarily upon structure and form, such as absolute music. The meaning that results from this content necessitates attention to interpretation rather than just attention to overall form. While Culler’s project of “understanding the various strategies of its forms” does illuminate the external conditions and connections related to the work, it takes the experience beyond the

artistic one that centers on contemplation by the reader (178).

Culler attempts to carefully maintain a position which upholds his preference for theory, while avoiding a pragmatist position in which literature enhances learning of everything external to literature itself. He concedes that pragmatism ignores “the question of how a text can challenge the conceptual framework with which one attempts to interpret it” (182). However, a view of literature which gives primacy to enjoyment and personal insight ultimately advances ideology, “by denying any public structure of argument in which the young or marginalized could challenge the views of their eminent elders, helps make their positions unassailable and in effect confirms a structure in place by denying that there is a structure” (179). In order to avoid the entrapment model of ideological transmission, theory is necessary in addition to the primary mode of reading as artistic engagement in order to articulate the cultural structures at work. The significance of theory, as influenced through Deconstruction, is in Culler’s terms the revelation of the “hierarchical oppositions [which] structure concepts of identity and the fabric of social and political life, and to believe that one has gone beyond them is to risk complacency abandoning the enterprise of critique, including the critique of ideology” (181). This position suggests that rejecting the use of a work as a model to examine the links in the chain of larger cultural forces will neglect ideological critique. However, there can be effective examinations of a work’s relation to culture, as theory often does, without abandoning the idea that it is an artistic work, and as such retains a level of complexity beyond other discourses as it contains its own internal tensions and alternative possibilities.

Despite his avoidance of pragmatism, Culler does agree with Richard Rorty in affirming that in the process of interpretation, “one thing we cannot do is set limits” (181). Meaning is not “the free creation of the reader,” as Eco fears, but rather it is a continual exploration, “the limits

of which cannot be identified in advance.” This response, however, ignores Eco’s “right of the text” which requires each interpretation to be evaluated in relation to the work as a whole.

Without the work acting as arbitrator of internal meaning, external use becomes dominant and the determiner of meaning is removed from the author, the work, and even the reader, while being relegated to endless contexts instead.

Culler’s ultimate reason for advocating extreme interpretation is a goal of “producing” something from the work, as he argues that:

A method that compels people to puzzle over not just those elements that might seem to resist totalization of meaning but also those about which there might initially seem to be nothing to say has a better chance of producing discoveries . . . than a procedure that seeks only to answer those questions that a text asks its model reader.” (182).

Since the limits of meaning cannot be fully defined during authorship, it does seem ultimately destructive to suggest that legitimate interpretations must be provoked by the work. Certainly Culler is right that part of the wealth contained within a literary work is its ability to produce discoverable meaning out of every detail, and he fears that the “play” of texts will diminish as a result of avoiding overinterpretation. To suggest, however, that every detail is nearly endless in producing meaning transforms the original work into something beyond its own stable identity, just as arbitrary limits on meaning can diminish the readily available possibilities it possesses.

What Culler doesn’t reference in this response is the category of aesthetic features. The possibility of future discovery lies in the aesthetic harmonics which provide multiple layers of meaning. These emergences rely only on the work itself without the contextual references to external culture which are part of the study of theory.

Culler agrees with Rorty’s pragmatic response to the idea of overinterpretation, claiming that the distinction is irrelevant: “there is no difference between using a text for your own

purposes and interpreting it as carefully as you can – both of these are just ways of putting the text to use . . . we should just use texts as we use word-processing programs, in an attempt to say something interesting” (177). This analogy ignores what should be a primary fact about literature: that it has specific internal content. A word processor, in contrast, has no content by design; it is a blank form intended to be used to the point that it no longer exists as a part of the final product. The literary work already has something to say. Proposing that it is just a starting point for readers to invent or realize their own “interesting” thoughts is a disservice to both the work and the author’s involvement in the complex and deliberate creation of the work, and places the totality of meaning into the reader’s response. It does not “respect” the work. Interpretation may be a kind of use, but using a text does not necessarily involve interpretation. The first acknowledges literature as a specific kind of discourse, while the latter removes this distinction and treats literature as just another cultural artifact, equivalent to anything else. Disregarding the distinction undermines the entire history and purpose of critical evaluation.

Culler’s resistance to limiting interpretation, as potential underinterpretation, ultimately presents its own danger. While new discourse and discussion can be generated from a process of ongoing interpretation, the discovery of which is based on the work under examination, the new interpretations can themselves become the basis of critical discourse. If the work is no longer the central basis for such discourse, then the new “discoveries” become something that stands alongside the work as detached material, and can potentially overshadow the original. The danger of allowing overinterpretation to stand as valid commentary is that the process may continue along that particular direction and become understood as the primary or sole meaning of significance. In such cases the new, and less connected, interpretations can obscure more legitimate examination. Culler’s concern regarding the dismissal of interpretations then returns

as a possibility. Identifying, and possibly discontinuing, a branch of interpretation which can be demonstrated as a bad one, an overinterpretation, diminishes material which can alter future readings. This reduces the risk of those “interpretations” having a negative impact on the other possibilities which are consistent with the whole work and have an equal claim to primacy, although they are created through the multi-valent “harmonics” of aesthetic language. As interpretations get further removed from the original work, they diminish the primacy of the work itself. Allowing complete inclusiveness in the critical examination of a work can eventually impose limitations by delegitimizing perspectives that contain more consistent and coherent interpretations. Intentional overinterpretation allows for an increase in the quantity of discoveries which are relative to the work, but it may diminish the quality of discourse overall by diluting it. While Culler regards this as under-interpretation, introducing elements which suggest a final “meaning” cut off the original possibilities and limit the ambiguous and harmonic qualities present. If *The Tempest* becomes regarded simply as a play about the American colonization of the New World, then all of the other geopolitical events which inspired its final form, and of which the play has something to say, becomes forgotten. Furthermore, the problem with interpretations that only use the work is that they become rewordings of it which replace the artistic construction itself and overshadow the original form. As a particular interpretation it then achieves a primacy over the work and its aesthetic formulation of meaning. This limits further reflection of the multivalent possibilities. Interpretations of use can always bring in something new to the discussion of the work. However, if they become removed from the work, and not directly supported by what the work articulates, then the discussion of the meaning becomes detached from the literary artifact and concerns something else and must be acknowledged as such.

While both views present significant arguments, the process of interpretation, as a method of literary study, should differentiate between these two possibilities, and recognize its own limit while realizing that over-interpreting a work imposes limits on the aesthetic dimension of it, systematizing it and reducing it to a meaning that is defined from outside of the work. There should be a recognition of the ideological content which clearly resides within the work and is supported by the work itself as a whole. This content necessarily influences the resulting interpretations. The meaning of such interpretations, which involve links to the larger culture, can be demonstrated to be present, while leaving the question of authorial intent undetermined. Conversely, interpretations which only use the work to provide a useful analysis of the larger culture should be recognized as existing externally to the work, and as material not necessarily embedded and supported by the author or by the work. They reside primarily in the receiving audience and in the web of connections that a work forms to culture and to other works, many of which originate some time after the completion of the literary work, and therefore cannot factor into the core meaning of it. Those interpretations which consider only the work, or the work as the primary determiner, apply to fields which consider the aesthetic elements and regard literature as unique. Those that consider all possibilities in relation to external factors are applicable to sociological and cultural studies, but are not necessarily literary.

Following Eco's argument, it seems that to study literature solely as an ideological document is to ignore the unique features which separate literature from other forms of discourse. At some point the interpretive process must end, leaving the individual reader to contemplate and feel the aesthetic effects beyond conceptualization. As an artistic form, literature contains aesthetic qualities as part of the harmonics produced. Ignoring these aspects, and focusing attention only on the cognitive content, is itself a form of under-interpretation.

Rather than simply transmitting ideology, aesthetic forms invite interpretation, and in doing so create a space of possibility in which new ideas can be introduced. The literary use of language becomes a break, a gap, in the existing ideology. As literature attempts to break new ground, to say something that hasn't been said before, it expands the reader's horizon. By inviting interpretation, the literary work attempts to connect with a more fundamental world, unlike an artificial product sustained only through conventional use of language. Through literature, the unarticulated world of the Real can be offered for experience.



### Chapter 3: The Ideological Possibilities of Literary Language

In the process of considering acceptable interpretations, the nature of language in its literary form must be recognized. The analysis provided in the works of both Alan Sinfield and Mikhail Bakhtin suggest a more complex structure to literature than many theoretical models of ideological transmission conclude. Sinfield argues that within culture there are always present “faultlines” where the dominant ideological views are challenged and modified. Bakhtin’s theories reveal a heterogeneous structure within the language that a literary work is constructed from, language which can present ideological tension within even a single sentence. A literary narrative consists of various languages found within a particular culture which are coextensive and remain in an ongoing dialogical tension. These languages contain various ideological views, which further function as different types of ideology altogether.

Although Sinfield supports the view that political meaning is the mode of primary significance present within a literary work, in *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* he challenges the view supported by Eagleton, which he calls the *entrapment model*. Derived from the work of Althusser and Foucault, this model suggests that: “ideological constructedness, not just of our ideas, but of our subjectivities, seems to control the scope for dissident thought and expression” (Sinfield 35). In response, Sinfield asks: “if we come to consciousness within a language that is continuous with the power structures that sustain the social order, how can we conceive, let alone organize, resistance?” (35). Sinfield’s question is an important one. Social change does occur as marginalized views become centralized. Literature’s place within this process appears not only as a possibility, but as a significant actuality. As a distinct type of discourse, literature engages not just what *is*, but what *could be* the case. The disparity between possibility and facticity creates a space for the reader to

reevaluate the static structure. Literature then becomes an agent of change, even as it reproduces the current ideological conditions in some ways.

The answer suggested by Sinfield is that the ideological structure of society always contains tension from various power struggles which keep it from attaining a unified wholeness. Within any society there will be faultlines where these struggles come into conflict and compete for inclusion in the dominant ideology. Since ideology is never static and unified it must be continually *produced*, as Raymond Williams claims, and through that process contradictions emerge (41). Sinfield claims that “the task for a political criticism, then, is to observe how stories negotiate the faultlines that distress the prevailing conditions of plausibility” (47). Literature is one device used in the advancement of these alternative ideologies and one way these conflicts become detectable and understood. Sinfield argues that “dissident potential derives ultimately not from essential qualities in individuals . . . but from conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself” (41). Describing the interaction between culture and utterance, Sinfield claims:

The inter-involvement of resistance and control is systematic: it derives from the way language and culture get articulated. Any utterance is bounded by the other utterances that the language makes possible. Its shape is the correlative of theirs: as with a duck/rabbit drawing, when you see the duck the rabbit lurks around its edges, constituting an alternative that may spring into visibility. Any position supposes an intrinsic opposition. All stories comprise within themselves the ghost of alternate stories they are trying to exclude. (47)

This visualization is instructive. The imprint of a work on the surrounding context produces a “ghost,” opening space for alternate perspectives to be created. Like an illustration that appears as two things simultaneously, a literary work conveys meaning relating to multiple structures at the same time. It works at two, or more, levels which may not be precisely compatible. Just as Žižek’s anchoring of ideology to a master-signifier produces *otherness* in any view not similarly

grounded, the narrative limits of a literary work suggest what it is *not*. It produces a negative which then can be compared back to itself, continually producing meaning. In response to new relations to its context, multiple interpretations can be established which are supported by the work as a whole. To pick one as the definitive interpretation may completely ignore a possibility that might be just as legitimate. Constraining the work within a pre-determined ideological mold, as entrapment theorists like Eagleton propose, dismisses other ideological perspectives. Such a method makes the work fit into pre-conceived notions and, as such, falls into *use* of the work without allowing it to exhibit its inherent perspectives on its own. Literary works, as cultural products, become pawns in a larger contest of ideology, even as they may ultimately provide an escape from that very structure.

Through the process of literary construction, the description of a culture embedded within a work brings out concealed details and allows a new viewpoint to emerge. Sinfield argues that “even a text that aspires to contain a subordinate perspective must first bring it into visibility . . . and once that has happened there can be no guarantee that it will stay safely in its prescribed place.” (48). Sinfield adds that “conversely, a text that aspires to dissidence cannot control meaning either” (48). Ultimately there can be no security in textuality.” Sinfield’s point is that when something new is created it emerges with possibilities. Although a work will not necessarily be received as ideologically consistent with the dominant mode, it is possible that a work which intends to reject the dominant view may, in some eventual way, reinforce it. The cultural landscape becomes disrupted, with the results unpredictable. The underlying contests between ideologies cannot be stabilized even when placed within the frame of a literary work. Marginal views can be enhanced and amplified, providing a challenge to the established system. Literature functions as a part of the fundamental faultlines within a culture, the point where

opposing views come into conflict. Sinfield's argument suggests a complexity to the nature of literature, there can never be a certainty that all interpretations of a work will be ideologically consistent with one side or another because there is an inherent ambiguity necessary in a poetic or literary structure. Only after the work is put into play will it support a position.

The ideological meaning of a literary text, in Sinfield's view, is ultimately a result of how the work impacts the culture. He concludes:

formal textual analysis cannot determine whether a text is subversive or contained. The historical conditions in which it is being deployed are decisive . . . meaning is not adequately deducible from the text-on-the-page. The text is always a site of cultural contest, but it is never a self-sufficient site. (49)

This ideological position of a work is then not an inherently fixed property of a work's meaning, it relies on external relations involved in use of the work. These relations likely do not even exist during authorship but come about much later, through a work's eventual reception. Sinfield's point is that meaning is always fluid, changing as the historical periods of reception change. While this undoubtedly pertains to ideology, which exists as an inter-subjective background larger than one particular author or work, the suggestion that a work has no independent meaning at all seems questionable. There are clearly universal experiences which can be dramatized and understood throughout history, as they are more fundamental than the shifting ideological practices of local culture. It is the world of the Symbolic and its particular understandings that changes as language and practice evolve, while the more fundamental existence of the Real escapes historical contingency. Meaning which relates to the Real and provides a glimpse of the outside edge of the Symbolic seems likely to be a part of the internal structure of a work, connected to the design, purpose, and essence that defines the unique identity of that work.

Sinfield's discussion of Shakespeare notes that those plays are "powerful stories," and as such "they contribute to the perpetual contest of stories that constitutes culture: its representations, and our critical accounts of them, reinforce or challenge prevailing notions of what the world is like, of how it might be . . . by appealing to the readers' sense of how the world is, the text affirms the validity of the model it invokes" (50). The nature of narrative stories in relation to our understanding of the world as described by Sinfield suggests that ideology can never be separated from art. However, as he claims, the potential for describing *how it might be* suggests the possibility of literature to provide a perspective beyond the current understanding, those ideological views which are necessarily contained within the Symbolic foundation of culture. By incorporating non-cognitive elements through aesthetic qualities, literature can bypass the current Symbolic structure and progress from one ideological base to another one. The literary work becomes a testing ground to model ideological views which can then be embraced or rejected by the reader.

While literary quality is commonly associated with coherence as a whole, Sinfield rejects this idea, arguing that reliance on coherence is an illusion, and its absence allows for dissident possibilities:

The quintessential traditional critical activity was always interpretation, getting the text to make sense . . . No story can contain all the possibilities it brings into play; coherence is always selection. And the range of feasible readings depends not only on the text but on the conceptual framework within which we address it. (50-51)

Sinfield recognizes the "harmonics" that Eco discusses, and includes all of the possibilities as a part of the complete work. Therefore, meaning can never be definitive, as new echoes arise which will need to be compared back to the work. Placing meaning into the external world, Sinfield reveals that a literary work can have an active consequence on the culture that produces

it. It is not pre-determined to passively transmit dominant modes of ideology, but introduces dissidence into the cultural contest of worldviews.

Like Sinfield's exploration, Mikhail Bakhtin's examination of language has revealed that there are complex forces and interactions below the surface of a literary work. He argues that literary discourse is dialogic, containing a multitude of voices and competing languages. This multiplicity of viewpoints, some pertaining to the author, some challenging the author or narrator, is a significant element of the aesthetic dimension of literature. Unlike a monologic work where one voice attempts to present one unified message, as found in persuasive works of rhetoric or propaganda, there is a tension and conflict found within a narrative work that necessarily projects a multivalent meaning.

In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Bakhtin discusses his concept of dialogism which defines language as a dialogue between multiple viewpoints, noting that it is stratified, fragmented, and constantly changing. Not only do the different interlaced languages within a work reflect different ideological positions, there are opposing types of ideology to be understood. Authoritarian discourse is an official, external ideology imposed on the subject. In contrast, internally persuasive discourse is a view adopted and developed freely by the subject. A literary work exists as a dialogue between it and the external world which envelops the work. This dialogue allows the aesthetic work to break down the authoritarian discourse that exerts pressure from the outside and replace it with internally persuasive discourse, resulting in new and open possibilities for thought.

Bakhtin's analysis illuminates how language, particularly in the literary form of the novel, operates on multiple levels. Language, he claims, "like the living concrete environment in which consciousness of the verbal artist lives – is never unitary" (Bakhtin 288). Various

languages, Bakhtin notes, “are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values (291). As symbolic structures, languages present the world in the form of conceptual organization, each producing a view constructed from a particular perspective which results in ideological distortion. Rather than exist as an objective, detached, universal method of description, language is already a process within culture, coloring any description.

Ideology, in Bakhtin’s assessment, is not a single, unified view that provides foundation for every aspect of understanding. Rather, it is split into many various levels of thought which are embodied in language. There are many ideological worlds in the process of interrelating:

every day represents another socio-ideological semantic ‘state of affairs’, another vocabulary, another accentual system . . . [language] represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth, given a bodily form.” (Bakhtin 291)

This has a significant impact on communication, and Bakhtin notes that “as a result of the work done by all these stratifying forces in language, there are no “neutral” words and forms –words and forms that belong to ‘no one’” (293). Previously determined, and always filled with past usage and connotation, language is specifically chosen and put into new use by an author who further modifies it. The writer “does not strip away the intentions of others . . . he does not violate these socio-ideological cultural horizons that open up . . . rather, he welcomes them into his work . . . and compels them to serve his own new intentions” (Bakhtin 299). Literature, in this view, attempts to incorporate many realms of thought, adding the meanings of the original intentions to the author’s meaning of the new work, providing additional possibilities rather than reducing all views to specific ones. As literature transmits ideological views, it is not just the dominant ones that are propagated. Ultimately, a large range of views come into significant

focus. Some become intensified, others diminished, but there is a continual process as various views become entangled.

While Bakhtin distinguishes the different modes of ideological discourse into authoritative and internal, he claims that “an individual’s becoming, an ideological process, is characterized precisely by a sharp gap between these two categories” (342). Transmission of an authoritative ideology does not necessarily cause one to adhere to it. The subject must internalize an ideological view in order for it to become a viable option. Readers, then, are not passively receptive, but rather take an active role in ideological immersion.

Perhaps the most significant aspect in understanding Bakhtin’s critique of ideology is his examination of how these different discourses work as they are presented in aesthetic form. Describing the presence of authoritative discourse, Bakhtin notes that it: “permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylized variants on it. It enters our consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass, one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it” (343). Furthermore, it “cannot be represented – it is only transmitted” (Bakhtin 344). As an indivisible mass, it cannot be “double-voiced” or integrated with other discourse as a “hybrid construction,” which leaves the artistic representation of it “impossible” (344). As ideology devoid of “play,” there is no chance for meaning to evolve, to be reconfigured in new contexts, or provide new insight. If the ideological view that it presents is not accepted by the reader, then it becomes just an object, an empty thing, and “falls out of the artistic context” (344). If it is accepted, then it remains viable, but as a distinct discourse detached from the rest of the meaning. Therefore, while literature may reproduce the dominant ideology, the authoritative mode is held in its own layer of the work and while it may be transmitted by the work it is not an integral part of the aesthetic experience. The



artistic meanings transcend this layer of context allowing this authoritative ideology to be examined separately from the meaning of the work as an artistic one. The ideological context may explain parts of the creative evolution of the work, but does not determine the overall meaning.

Although the two kinds of discourse can unite in rare instances so that the authoritative is persuasive and the persuasive gains authority, Bakhtin argues that it is usually the case that the authoritative is distanced and unengaging, while the internally persuasive “is denied privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society” (342). In this acknowledgement, Bakhtin reveals a significant aspect of literature; those meanings which become persuasive to the reader, but yet fall outside of the social construct, detached from the ideological system. This suggests something outside the Symbolic order, but which is capable of being apprehended by the subjective individual. This struggle between conflicting discourses and voices “determine[s] the history of an individual ideological consciousness” (342). The individual’s ideological views are not completely coextensive with all other members of society. Each individual develops views which are internally persuasive, creating a unique variation of the culturally dominant one, which becomes expanded or modified over time.

As art is an event that challenges the values of the audience, internally persuasive discourse brings about open possibilities in contrast to the authoritative, as Bakhtin notes:

It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is, freely, developed, applied to new material, new conditions . . . it enters into an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses . . . the semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean (345).

As an author’s vision becomes shared with the reader, meaning becomes dislodged from one particular viewpoint and partially contained within another’s view. While suggesting “newer

ways to mean,” Bakhtin’s exploration supports some rights of the work. When internal discourse constitutes an artistic work, superseding externally imposed authority, the work will remain creative and productive (345). As the contexts and views of the reader change, and the intentions of the author become more distant, the one stable point will be the work, a fixed set of utterances. There is some uniquely identifiable object that is the originator of meaning in all of these new conditions, a common element of each new interpretation. As a central point, around which all new meanings revolve, the work is left as the determining factor in interpretation, still possessing some of the shared meaning. In stressing aesthetic essence, Bakhtin claims that form and content are one and must be understood in relation as a whole. Arguing that “these heterogeneous stylistic unities, upon entering the novel combine to form a structured artistic system, and are subordinated to the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole, a unity that cannot be identified with any single one of the unities subordinated to it,” Bakhtin notes that the constituent elements of language that make up the work lose individual meaning which is superseded by the meaning generated by the entire work (262).

Making a distinction between narrative language of the novel and poetic language, Bakhtin argues that poetic language is a unified voice of the poet, in contrast to the heterogeneous make-up of the novel. While there is an apparent absence of the tensions found in a the multi-voice form of the novel, this view does seem to disregard the possible disparity between the poet and the speaker of the poem, as well as the inclusion of language from various discrete aspects of social life which enhance the meaning of each line and adds dimension as it expands the poetic possibilities in multiple directions. As the language in poetry is foregrounded, the disjunction between possible meanings of words creates its own heterogeneity without the need for

numerous characters to elucidate distinct viewpoints, as found in a narrative work. Taking into account these aspects of poetic language, poetry seems to be as potentially dialogic as the novel.

Rather than an abstract and detached system, Bakhtin recognizes language as already immersed in cultural thought, and recognizes language as “ideologically saturated . . . as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a maximum of mutual understandings in all spheres of ideological life” (271). Aware that language operates within the historical and social contexts that envelop the world of a particular culture, Bakhtin claims that:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against the thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (276)

While language is non-neutral, and entering into discourse brings into play all of the past meanings and connotations, artistic works can make use of this preconditioned understanding. Deliberately interacting with language and the reader, Bakhtin understands literature to be an active event, and notes that the writer “elevates the social heteroglossia surrounding objects into an image that has finished contours, an image completely shot through with dialogized overtones; he creates artistically calculated nuances on all the fundamental voices and tones of this heteroglossia” (278). The author uses the tension between views to bring new meaning out of discourse, knowing that there is an internal incompatibility, or possible contradiction that will never be resolved. Making use of these persistent and unresolved “overtones” to create “nuances” that enhance meaning leaves open room for interpretation and continual reevaluation in relation to the ideological contexts surrounding the work.

In contrast, “all rhetorical forms,” Bakhtin argues, are “monologic in their compositional structure” (280). They are a single voice which is narrowly directed at the listener, transmitting a

view without creating an open dialogue. Novelistic discourse maximizes the dialogic properties of language, and the coexistence of multiple perspectives. The dialogic nature invites a response from the reader, but the response is one that must relate to the ambiguous nature of the ongoing discourse. Consequently, literature produces its own antithesis to previously determined interpretations; it resists synthesis into one interpretive conclusion. Bakhtin's categorization reveals not only the complexity of language, but the continual struggle occurring between meanings which make a complete static understanding impossible to definitively determine. Meaning can constantly shift as the work falls into new contextual relations. Therefore, a work has the potential to introduce new ideological thought as it is encountered by new readers. To suggest a work is precisely a product of the ideological determined base of a particular culture, or to say that only one interpretation is an accurate one, is to ignore the possibilities that reside within it. Fixing the work to a particular viewpoint is to put it to use, but does not capture the meaning, or meanings, which are inherently possible.

In *Mikhail Bakhtin*, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist further articulate Bakhtin's aesthetic theory, noting that he "seeks the aesthetic where it was traditionally avoided, in the totality of the author/text/reader relationship" (208). His view suggests that:

Any theory in art must take into account three elements: creators, artworks, and perceivers. Formalists over-privilege the second category, while idealists invest too much in the first and third categories. Both extremes get the subject wrong. 'They attempt to discover the whole in the part. . . Meanwhile, the 'artistic' in its total integrity is not located in the artifact and it is not located in the separately considered psyches of creator and contemplator; it encompasses all three of these factors.' (202)

This assessment helps illuminate the challenges of interpretation, first by recognizing the importance of the residing aesthetic qualities and the integrity of a work as an artistic object, and further by noting that authorial intent has a significance, as does the independent work itself, in

addition to the continuing reception of the readers. Interpretation cannot be left to be fully determined by only one component; realizing the importance of each aspect of this triad imposes some limits on the other two. Like Eco's intention of the work, there always remains the initial creative product which contains the unchangeable language of the work. The persistence of it through varying contexts can override reception which takes interpretation of meaning too far. Bakhtin attempts what Clark and Holquist call a "cosmological shift," moving "the center of the textual world" from the author to the work, placing literary works within the "give and take of narrative energy" exerted by its constituent voices. (245). As a result of this shift, the work adds its own voice to that of the author, rejecting any initial, privileged monologic viewpoint.

As Clark and Holquist's discussion of Bakhtin emphasizes, his view revolves around the idea that literary works are "never finally completed," as "an utterance can never be 'finished': a residue of meaning must be left over even after the most exhaustive analysis of [it]" (188). While the formalists claimed that the work was a coherent whole, "the sum of its devices," for Bakhtin the work is more than that (188). The aesthetic object "is not completely coincidental with the external, material form but is nevertheless inseparable from it . . . [and] is never fully grasped but is rather an act of understanding that is not yet completely understood. Any attempt to limit art to its brute form treats art as if it were over, as if it were a thing and not a deed" (Clark and Holquist 189). The meaning of the work exceeds the understanding of any one point of observation, transcending both the available conceptual framework of a historic point, and the perception of any one reader, as each one will have different receptions. Recognizing art as a distinct category requires understanding that meaning can never be fully apprehended.

This remainder of meaning that is not yet understood and is not fully contained in the sum of the work suggests an incompleteness which can be considered in a Lacanian framework.

The wider meaning falls outside of the known understandings of language in the denotative sense, which exist within the limitations of the Symbolic, leaving a remainder of meaning to persist only in the Real. The work of art, through its aesthetic nature, bridges the limit of these two orders. While it cannot bring defined meaning to the Real, the aesthetic points toward that space, and allows meaning to be expanded through future considerations, as the limits of the Symbolic are pushed further out. This is a never ending process, however, as new understandings and interpretations arise the Symbolic limits will be expanded again, allowing new interpretations.

Dialogism, as Clark and Holquist describe it, “is Bakhtin’s attempt to think his way out of such all-pervasive monologism” (348). Denoting a “single truth,” monologism “is the conceptual glue which holds together the complex mosaic of religious, political, psychological, and aesthetic attitudes that were typical of most cultures in the past” (348). Put into an aesthetic form, literature is disconnected from these other types of discourse, and there is an inverse relationship between the specific meaning located within a social context, and its artistic universality. As Clark and Holquist state it:

the freer from specific alterities or the less subordinate to local conditions of expression a text becomes, the more aesthetic it becomes. Aesthetics, in other words, constitutes a version of liberty. . . . Insofar as the aesthetic is indeed a sphere in which local factors are least determining, it is always the world of greatest otherness, the biggest loophole through which the present may escape to a future undreamed of in worlds of less expansive discourse, such as politics or religion, where the future is a knowable outcome of the present. (210-11)

Incorporating “otherness,” literary language does not focus narrowly like monologic discourse, but rather widens and diffuses, so that a larger view can possibly emerge. It is not limited directly to the particulars of an immediate situation. Rather than attempting to causally have a direct impact on the physical world, like rhetorical works, literature adds to understanding and

perception for a less immediate, but more profound impact on agents within the world. Literary language includes a dimension of value, which necessitates a consideration of quality that cannot be reduced to quantitative terms.

Though the harmonic qualities of literature, which allows it to always say more than it apparently utters, there is an introduction of ideas from the outside of a particular, local historical situation. Bakhtin:

assigns the term “novel” to whatever form of expression within a given literary system reveals the limit of that system as inadequate, imposed, or arbitrary. . . . It does not permit generic monologue. It insists on a dialogue between texts that a given system admits as literature and those texts which are excluded from such a definition. The novel is a kind of epistemological outlaw, a Robin Hood of texts. Because the fundamental features of any culture are inscribed in its texts, not only in its literary texts but in its legal and religious ones as well, “novelness” can work to undermine the official or high culture of any society. (Clark and Holquist 276-277)

Bakhtin then rejects the Marxist view that literature was “just part of the ideological superstructure reflecting the economic base” (Clark and Holquist 190). As an active process, revealing the limits of a social system, art injects something new and can then challenge the existing ideologies, which persist only in the artificial constructs of pre-existing discourse. Attempting to describe how the literary work exists as an aesthetic artifact, as well as a socio-economic product, Bakhtin argues that the aesthetic and social qualities are not separate, but are entangled within the work. However, the aesthetic essence cannot be defined by the social and economic conditions, just as physical properties of an object cannot be determined from its economic value. Bakhtin notes that the aesthetic properties of the work clearly belong to “the ‘conceptual’ realm of the mind” (Clark and Holquist 200). As a layer of qualities distinctly removed from the physical properties that the work maintains in the material world, aesthetic properties reveal meaning as the perception of the observer engages with the work to evoke

mental responses. Irreducible to just the external elements, the artistic quality of the work is then more than the sum of its parts, and it resides purely in the realm of human activity. This immediate connection between artwork and mind functions as a way of interpreting the world, and subsists as a parallel to language, but without the limitations of defined language as it organizes conceptual understanding.

Suggesting a level of literary autonomy, Bakhtin notes that aesthetic works are not, unlike other kinds of discourse, “locally dependent on one context. Aesthetics is a special instance of communicating in which the text makes a minimal appeal to its environment for help in constructing its meaning” (Clark and Holquist 209). Thus, the construction of meaning arises primarily from the internal structure of the work, rather than external factors. Aesthetic meaning, as suggested by this view, is similar to existential meaning of the self. Both are always open to reinterpretation and never finally defined. For Bakhtin, “a self, or a text, can never achieve complete autonomy, but the less determined each is by its local environment, the freer each is to live and have meaning in other contexts” (Clark and Holquist 210). Construction of the self takes place within the struggle between the internally persuasive and the authoritative. Clark and Holquist note that the significance of Bakhtin’s favorite work *The Decameron* is the idea that “there is always a loophole” (347). This conclusion recognizes that:

there are no ultimate explanations that everyone, without exception, will accept as exhausting all possibilities . . . heterogeneity and contradiction . . . dominate human life and the consequent speciousness of all claims to the absolute . . . Dialogism is founded on the ineluctability of our ignorance, the necessary presence of gaps in all our fondest schemes and most elaborate systems. (Clark and Holquist 347)

In rejecting absolutes, Bakhtin recognizes that human life is full of contradiction, and therefore literature, as a reflection of life and human ambiguity, will then contain its own contradictions as well. The expression found in art reveals the difficulties and frustrations encountered in life,



where sustaining a systematic completeness is unworkable. Even the most “elaborate systems” cannot completely explain reality. While revealing the incompleteness of the social world, art also reveals the possibility of human freedom. This understanding of art emphasizes the gap between the Symbolic and the Real orders. While the structures of the Symbolic attempt to totalize knowledge into a complete system, there is always something remaining that does not fit and eventually emerges as a contradiction. Alternatively, at the level of the Real, knowledge may be incomplete and understanding non-conceptual, but there is a persistent freedom that aligns with human existence as a lived activity in the immediate world. Literature is a recognition of this condition, which becomes further emphasized in the aesthetic.

### Chapter 4: Aesthetics and the Real

A work which stands out as being predominately interpreted in relation to ideological modes is George Orwell's novel *1984*. This novel is quite often presented as an allegory of the dangers of left-wing politics in defense of right-wing political ideology. Historically and biographically the conventional ideological reading has been revealed to be inaccurate in respect to Orwell's personal view as a Socialist and his ability to separate Stalinist totalitarianism from Socialism. That specific interpretation, then, is not plausibly synonymous with the original intention of the work. Even if this extraneous evidence is discarded through consideration of legitimate primary material, the aesthetic construction of the novel through its subjective narrative undermines its own potential conclusion as a specific ideological position. Due to the explicit foregrounding of ideological conditions, this work does add significant contributions to political discourse. While similar dystopian works become parables to illustrate the author's personal ideological argument, and hence to persuade the reader to adopt a particular viewpoint, Orwell's narrative leaves an inconclusive ending which provides space for the reader to mentally respond. Through conscious reference to an ideological framework, *1984* calls out ideology itself for critique, and suggests that viewpoints are not immutable and the reader's perspective about ideology can remain fluid. Orwell reveals that language and ideology are inseparable, and rather than having an effect on any particular ideology, the restructuring of language effects all political thought.

The "meaning" of *1984* is not Orwell's rejection of ideology altogether, as a method of left-wing politics which taken to an extreme degree would become an authoritarian Big Brother. This interpretation is often presented as an apparent non-ideological position which rejects ideology as a tool of Socialism. It is, however, certainly ideological as it attempts to present

Orwellian society as an “other” in contrast to the “self,” its own anti-left position. The fictional world, it is presumed, exists beyond a “false consciousness” which forms the limit, distorting and separating it from the “truth,” providing a mirror that defines the “true” undistorted world of the interpreter. Rather, Orwell’s attempt at meaning, on the surface level, suggests an evaluation of all ideology. Several points in the story explicitly state that the Party is not associated with Communism, as when O’Brien suggests a contrast to the Communist belief that “around the corner lay a paradise where human beings are free and equal” in his response that “we are not like that” (Orwell 217). The work is therefore not an allegory of twentieth-century movements, but an exploration of a deeper underlying structure. There is an awareness of the ideological process explicit in the work, as it describes a society that is hyper-ideological. The sanctioned ideology of the Party is foregrounded in every aspect of life as a monolithic singularity that totalizes all elements of life and culture, eliminating any dissident thought, rather than subsisting as a transparent influence.

*1984* clearly presents the nature of ideology as existing inextricably within the order of language. The evolution of language into Newspeak is an attempt by the official ideology of Insoc to narrow meaning and eliminate any ambiguity or connotation. Language is reduced to a mathematical specificity, and all ambiguity and multivalent possibility is removed. The reduction of meaning into a single possibility will then eradicate any dissident views that challenge a pure ideology. Determining precisely how individuals would think, “the purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Insoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible” (Orwell 246). Through continual reduction of available language, the Party could “diminish the range of thought” to the point that “thought diverging from the principles of Insoc- should be literally unthinkable”

(Orwell 300). Not only is there an elimination of the possibility of political thought, how things could or should be, but the very understanding of reality is compressed, as the Party claims that “in the end we shall make thought crime impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it” (41). Everything contained in language, all information, historic records and written discourse is controlled to the point that Winston realizes “most of the material . . . had no connection with anything in the real world” (Orwell 37). Ideology is shown to be purely artificial construct, deliberately produced and manipulated through psychological processes; it does not reside as a natural foundation. Since ideology resides within a conceptual framework, reducing the available concepts leaves just one singular view, it is a thesis with no antithesis. In this world of constricted language, art, particularly the literary arts, becomes an impossibility.

In “Language and Ideology in George Orwell’s 1984,” Steven Blakemore emphasizes the connection between language and ideology in the novel. The world is understood through language, and as meaning is strictly narrowed and defined that understanding can be shaped and controlled. Blakemore remarks that “control of language masks a profound hatred of language, as long as language can express a rebellious reality the Party will never be completely satisfied” (354). Although intent on actualizing the process of destroying old languages and replacing them with a tightly regulated one, the Party realizes “even newspeak is potentially subversive to its ideology. Consequently, the Party’s goal is to destroy language itself” (Blakemore 355). As such, the existence of any language system at all can allow dissent and undermine the dominant ideological thought. Furthermore, “as the Party violently breaks the delicate nexus between language and reality, it attempts to “break” the very nature of language as we know it” (Blakemore 354). Even language as communication, the very basic characteristic of human interaction is in peril within this ideological process. There is an inherent contradiction in the

process, as it can never be narrowed enough. “In fact,” Blakemore claims, “the Party's ideology ensures that there can never be a definitive edition” of *Newspeak* (354). Within the narrative, Blakemore notes, books become a symbol for resistance, a location where language breaks free from the sociopolitical restraints. There are secret books, such as Winston’s diary and Goldstein’s forbidden book, where thought can be freely explored, and the world outside of Oceania can be evaluated.

The forbidden aspects of these literary constructs suggest a quality embedded within literature that escapes the thought horizon imposed by the inter-subjective social world. The more totalizing the ideological world becomes, the more it creates a question of what it is not. The attempt by the Party is to create a world which exists solely in the Symbolic order, carefully and deliberately constructed through language to construct meanings that precisely fit the Party worldview. O’Brien claims that “external reality is not important . . . reality is inside the skull” (Orwell 218). This process, however, does not account for the Real. Experience as it is fully encountered before linguistic concepts cannot be fully explained, or concealed, in this narrow language, and the excess meaning which does not fit into official definition hints at the Real, the experience beyond language, and the possibility that things could be different. While many regard *1984* as a description of the radical realization of actually existing ideologies, the work is an exploration of the inversion of the signifier and signified, where what is real is what is stated in language, despite what occurs in the raw physical existence. The outcome of this system of ideology is the complete negation of the Real. The constant need to redefine language suggests the inherent possibilities of dissent that cannot be ordered by dominant thought and must continually be battled to retain control. Beyond an apparent argument of ideology, Orwell’s work underneath is a defense of art, and its application in language as an escape to a wider truth.

The geopolitical structure of *1984*, as shifting alliances of the “other” in relation to the national self, reveals several aspects of ideology at work. Not only is the endless war necessary to help subjugate the populace in a totalitarian manner, but the “other” is necessary to even define what is to be a member of “our” culture. Oceania needs the rivals of Eurasia and Eastasia to define the limits of its own “true” ideology. Even though the consistent ideologies of all three super-states, persisting as Neo-Bolshevism in Eurasia and as the Death worship of East Asia, are “very much the same,” they are perpetuated as “others,” providing a contrast to “truth” (Orwell 162). Whatever constitutes the national identities of Eurasia and Eastasia, they are false understandings, and can be displayed as a commonly understood example of “not us”. Ideology exists as a continual conflict, because at a more fundamental level the world exists in a state of social antagonism, as claimed by Zizek. Ideology can never exist as a stable, unified theory shared by all members of a culture. There will be points where the unresolvable antagonisms bleed through. In the case of *1984*, the presence of alternate ideologies presumed to be “false” provides the most stability for Oceania to give authenticity to their own. Goldstein’s endless rebellion also serves this purpose. It is deliberately allowed to propagate in appearance, despite possibly being only a fiction, in order to cover over any possible disruptions which would show the artificiality of the Party’s ideology.

Had the Party succeeded in destroying language, and with it any possible dissent, there could be realization of a point where no conflict ever occurs. This success of Newspeak would control all of reality, by completely controlling all perception of it; there would be no edge of thought where language breaks down, no faults where thoughts are contested. There would just be infinite sameness. In this perfectly stable and harmonious civilization, there would no longer be a need for any art or literature, as the annihilation of ideology would destroy aesthetic

possibilities as well. Without the possible idea that things could be different, somehow other than they are, no artistic endeavors could be inspired or considered. The result would be a perfectly ordered machine, artificial and inhuman, controlling desire and the irrational tendencies of the human. At the end of history there would be no meaning. O'Brien admits this as he explains total exertion of power will create a world where "there will be no art, no literature and no science" (Orwell 220). However, without an anti-thesis, this non-ideological state there would have nothing to ground meaning in the master signifier, risking the cohesiveness of the State. Because reality, although totalized, would still exist as a construct, not as an objective God's-eye viewpoint of all physical reality, the potential for any excess of the Real to be introduced as a disruption could cause non-stability within the established world. Thus, the annihilation of language would ultimately be an impracticality, both in everyday existence and as an apparatus of the State. An apparently totalized, non-ideological, State would be as undesirable as a hyper-ideological one, as it would be both inhuman and absurd.

Orwell could have framed the particular ideas of this story in one of his academic works on language and discussed them in relation to reality. But, by setting them in a fictional future, an aesthetic experience results. Presenting the ideas in an article would have shaped an argument leading to a precise conclusion. Alternatively, developing the ideas into a fictional form allows for a discussion in which each reader will find his or her own unique viewpoint to add. *1984* provides a commentary on ideology in practice that can be used to critique real world ones, and provides an example of a society that manipulates language for an ideological purpose which can be used as a comparison to ones like the Communist governments of the twentieth century, but it can also be used to evaluate those which are anti-Big Brother. However, as a fictional presentation it creates much more ambivalence as the reader is immersed in the perspective of

the protagonist within the haunting images of an alien, but logically consistent, world. Through shared experience with the character the reader comes to personally understand how this world can actually function and the abstract theory is put into a test model. As an artistic experience, the reader is confronted with questions regarding the individuals' relation to truth, allegiance, and responsibility. At the center of the work resides the question of sanity as Smith attempts to discern truth. Often confronted by his own dreams of his mother and of the past, Smith experiences images and feelings that cannot be completely understood in his everyday reality; something from outside his world begins to surface. It is at the point when Smith reaches a new level of awareness through contemplation of the sky, comprehending that it will be up to the proles to realize that things can be different, that his free thought is terminated and he is pulled back into the Symbolic world dominated by ideology. This is perhaps the most aesthetic point of the novel, when freedom and hope enter the narrative as possibilities through sublime apprehension that the world is larger than Insoc's characterization of it. The immediate reversal, when all hope is lost, sets up the dramatic tension that reveals what is lost, what exists beyond the wall of language. Forced to choose between two worlds, Smith had betrayed the Symbolic world of the Party to embrace his personal desire of the Real through the illicit relationship with Julia. Execution by the Party means not only physical death in the Real, but one's entire personal existence is nullified as all records are erased from history. The Party exemplifies Žižek's proposal that "you only die twice," once in the Symbolic and once in the Real ("Sublime" 145). After facing punishment and reeducation, the Party is able to destroy Smith's human desires of the Real, and force him to exist entirely within their reality of the Symbolic, thus unnaturally constraining his human dimension and crippling his sanity. Thus he exists in an undead state, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, without connection to the Real.



The objective of the world of Insoc is the opposite of what is accomplished by literature. Newspeak, in its ongoing process of removing words from language use, attempts to deny the possibility that language can describe an alternate reality, supporting the naturalized worldview constructed from Newspeak. In contrast, the multiplicity of meaning at work in literature provides alternate views, many of which can result in subversive visions, potentially rivaling the dominant thought. Rather than “the meaning,” *meanings*, as a multiplicity beyond the surface, can arise from all of the events, descriptions, and word choices present. Orwell, in opposition to the Party of his work, shows that wider and less controlled connotations provide an escape from the ideological constraints of language. As an example to be used as an illustrative model, it is effective. However, simply categorizing *1984* as an example of the ideological nature of left wing governments is an instance of overinterpretation, as it leaves that idea as the final definition without acknowledging the deeper aspects of the work that allow it to additionally address other themes. The novel concerns itself with psychology as much as politics, and other layers of interpretation regarding religious themes persist as well. The common ideological interpretation that often results falls into political discourse, and is not concerned with its literary nature, which would explore all of the possibilities that the work internally provides.

Literary works such as *1984*, can reveal something about ideology even as they originate from within it. The unavoidable influence of ideology has been positively revealed by literary theory. Woven into the fabric of cultural understanding, it is what explains the world and provides a “sense” of how things are, however disconnected that view might actually be from objective existence. Therefore, it makes all understanding political. Despite the similarities between art and ideology in attempting to connect the object and the subject, Žižek’s Lacanian explanation of the perception of reality suggests how they can ultimately function in different

ways. Žižek's approach is to examine the gaps and contradictions present in cultural artifacts, which can be used to illuminate the ideological functions of these artifacts. This provides a realization that ideology covers inconsistencies in existence by attempting to provide a smooth, unified, and totalizing, systematic method for categorizing reality. Because these inconsistencies are detectable, this unification can never be complete. Art, by its design as a complex and ambiguous structure, can not only identify these inconsistencies, but can intentionally create and intensify them. Where Žižek uses cultural artifacts to expose the certain presence of ideology, the experience of these artworks can be used to find the limits of the ideology. As Žižek states:

The Real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (symbolic universes); but at the same time its status is thoroughly precarious; it is something that persists only as failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature. ("Sublime" 190)

Žižek's definition provokes a connection between the Real and the aesthetic. The Real is the most basic encounter with existence and drives humanity to produce new ways of elucidating that encounter through the art work. As a sublime presence, like the quilting points of ideology, aspects of the Real are too large to be fully grasped. The aesthetic realm allows for exploration of the gap between the cognitively articulated and the experiential limits of existence itself. The experience of the Real is continually retold through history in a variety of ways, from different cultural perspectives through different forms such as drama, novel and poetry, but the "hard core" of definitive experience is never fully articulated. While literature attempts to grasp and describe the fundamental experiences that are universal human ones, it never fully reaches a complete parity, as experience transcends mere linguistic description. The literary works points toward that experience, but it is one which is always out of the complete grasp of the work, "in a shadow." The Real remains behind the Symbolic representation, and while literature cannot fully

describe the world with accuracy, through aesthetic means it provides a simulated experience.

The resulting aesthetic effect produced by language stands behind and apart from the narrative as a parallel. It is larger than interpreted meaning and transcends reductive articulation.

Entrapment theories, like Eagleton's, fail to account for the aesthetic effects that emerge beyond language. These emotive and visceral parallels to the cognitive content provide and amplify meaning which cannot be conceptualized. While Eagleton supports theory as a way of breaking the common misconception of dominant views existing as necessary and natural facts, aesthetics has a similar goal. It provides a counter balance to the ideological content and exposes the artificiality of presumed thought. The point of committing attention to aesthetics, is not useless, as Eagleton suggests, but rather provides something beyond use, revealing additional meaning. Foregrounding the cultural context over the specifics of the work reveals further understanding of the cultural practices that reside in the Symbolic, while allowing the unique aesthetic aspects of the particular work to remain in sharp focus reveals connections to the Real which extends beyond particular cultures. Theory should not assume that aesthetics reinforces a false sense of reality, rather it should include discussion of the aesthetic as another form of breaking through the horizon of thought and realizing that things could be different. As a space where the Real and the Symbolic struggle, literature is a battleground of ideas, presenting them for consideration and evaluation, and in turn creating new ones. Rather than transmitting just the dominant views of a culture, literary works transmit the cultural dialogue which is never fully resolved, but continues on in a state of flux. The dominant views may be present on the surface, but within the work there is a suggestion of dissent and the emergence of an antithesis which can overturn every definitive proposition.

Non-literary works, those of a monologic nature, are much better suited for the sociological analysis of culture because those works are not built on an ambiguous foundation, but rather attempt to transmit a precise message that represents something in the cultural ideology. The significance of literature, as well as other artistic creations, is that they can open a space to communicate a knowledge which escapes transmission through conceptual systems. As ideology reveals its own limitations, there are vague notions which are not fully articulated or completely systemized within experience. Art can originate these notions and, while exploring them, illustrate alternatives to the existing orders of experience. Although literature is constructed out of the arbitrary and contingent elements of language, it foregrounds language and highlights this detachment from the signified world, allowing it to possess a complexity of meaning. The aesthetic work places experience back into an ambiguous state, one which reverts to the pre-Symbolic, before it has been artificially oversimplified through social and conceptual processes, and reverses the compartmentalization and reduction into discrete terms. As art accesses the space where the Symbolic meets the Real, the ultimate value of literature is that it can rearrange the ideological fields, providing more perspective without pressing a particular work into a fixed ideological form. Rather the remaining ideologically neutral, it is a space where multiple ideologies can persist, conflict, intertwine, coextend, and be reflected in comparison. While both aesthetics and ideology exist at the edge of human understanding, at the limit of thought, ideology fixes that boundary while aesthetics expands it as it attempts deeper understandings of experience. In doing so, art escapes ideology.

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